

DOCTORAL THESIS

The Unravelers

Rasa, Becoming, and the Buddhist Novel

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THE UNRAVELERS

Rasa, Becoming, and the Buddhist Novel

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of PhD

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ABSTRACT

The Unravelers is a Buddhist novel of literary fiction, which to my knowledge is the first in the last one hundred years to synthesize the Buddhist teachings and values found in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon, the theory of ancient Indian *kāvya* literature, and the latest stylistic and structural innovations of contemporary literary fiction. The narrative follows four characters from the moment of their deaths as they manipulate the process of becoming—the mental act of creating and entering into “worlds.” The novel depicts the characters’ development of dispassion for a variety of realms, resulting in their eventual return to the human world with the motivation necessary to practice the Buddhist path.

My critical essay opens with an introduction to *kāvya* and Theravāda Buddhist concepts that are particularly relevant to the process of creating a fictional world—namely, *saṅkhāra* (fabrication) and *bhava* (becoming)—and the inherent karma of writing. Section II “Literary Review” explores narrative modes from Theravāda Buddhist literature and develops them through experimental narrative modes of contemporary literary fiction. Section III discusses the depiction of becoming, fabrication, and dispassion through the novel’s characters. Section IV “*Rasa*,” explains the theory of how a reader experiences the work’s savor, while relating the use of *rasa* in *The Unravelers* to the early Buddhist *kāvyas* (the *Pāli* Canon’s *Udāna* and *Dhammapada*, and two works by Aśvaghoṣa). Section V evaluates the classic use of Buddhist concepts and metaphors in Aśvaghoṣa’s *Handsome Nanda* as compared to *The Unravelers*. Section VI examines Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* as a forerunner to the genre of the Buddhist novel and Keith Kachtick’s *Hungry Ghost* as archetypal. Section VII concludes by detailing *The Unravelers*’ contribution to the Buddhist novel.

THE UNRAVELERS

Prologue: The Flavor-Earth	6
Vanessa: Return	12
Leo	17
Jules.....	23
Kairos.....	26
Vanessa: Fractals	27
Kairos: Birth.....	30
Vanessa	42
Vanessa: Seeds.....	46
Leo: “All Beings Subsist on Food”	49
Vanessa: Deprived of Water, Burned	60
The Guild: A Warning	62
Leo: The Narrow Corridor.....	64
Leo: The First Meeting	69
Vanessa: Night Train	76
Leo: The Vacuum of Time.....	89
The Guild: Sub-Verbal and Veiled Correspondences.....	95
Jules: Traplines	97
Jules: The Ends of a Line.....	101
Vanessa: A Light at the Surface.....	110
Vanessa: Cigarettes, Candy	117
Vanessa: Amelie	121
Vanessa: Don’t Run, Don’t Sink	128
Vanessa: Deep Sea Blossoms	131
Jules: Lobster Pots	137
Jules: Lotuses	143
Jules: Caught.....	150
Jules: Y2K.....	153
Vanessa: First Light.....	155
Kairos: New Yorkers	163
Kairos: Year Zero	171
Vanessa: Gears.....	175
Vanessa: Crossing.....	178
Kairos: Night 1, Density	184
Kairos: Earlier Day 1, Journey.....	185
Kairos: Night 1, Travel	186
Kairos: Night 1, Meditation	189
Vanessa: Change in Orientation.....	192
Leo: Designs	194
Leo: The First Death	208
Kairos: Day 2, Meeting.....	219
Kairos: Day 2, The Procedure.....	221

Kairos: Day 2, The Contract	242
Kairos: Day 2, Return	243
Kairos: Day 3, Driving	246
Kairos: Day 3, Night	260
Vanessa: An Address to Leo, the Boy with String	263
Kairos: Day 4, The Climb	270
Kairos: Rebirth	283
Vanessa: Group Jump	284
Jules: Return	285

RASA, BECOMING, AND THE BUDDHIST NOVEL

I. Introduction: Creating a World through Buddhist <i>Kāvya</i>	287
The Karma of Writing a Buddhist Novel	296
II. Literary Review	301
The Precursors of the Buddhist Novel: Jack Kerouac and J.D. Salinger	302
Recent Criticism on Buddhism and Literature	308
Incorporating Narrative Modes from Theravāda Buddhist Literature	316
Two Examples of Buddhist Novels	316
The Early Buddhist <i>Kāvyas</i>	321
<i>Dhamma</i> Talks in the Thai Forest Tradition	324
<i>The Pilgrim Kamanita</i>	331
Adopting Experimental Narrative Modes through Structure and Voice	339
<i>Dictee</i>	339
<i>Cloud Atlas</i> , <i>The Light People</i> , <i>Hungry Ghost</i> and <i>The Wives of Los Alamos</i>	340
III. Constructing and Deconstructing Literary Worlds	357
Becoming	357
Fabrication	361
Dispassion	364
IV. <i>Rasa</i>	365
History	365
The Karma of Reading a Buddhist <i>Kāvya</i>	367
Depiction of <i>Rasa</i> in <i>The Unravelers</i>	377
The Heroic and Astounding <i>Rasas</i> in the Early Buddhist <i>Kāvyas</i> and <i>The Unravelers</i>	381
The Calmed <i>Rasa</i>	396
The Depiction of Right Resolve in Aśvaghoṣa and <i>The Unravelers</i>	398
The Calm of Renunciation in <i>The Unravelers</i>	404
V. Metaphor in Aśvaghoṣa's <i>Handsome Nanda</i> and <i>The Unravelers</i>	411
Narrative Cohesion through Metaphor	411
Conceptual Metaphor and Objectifying Craving	414
The Elements as Appropriate Attention	419

VI. The Buddhist Novel Then and Now: Jack Kerouac and Keith Kachtick	427
Jack Kerouac's <i>The Dharma Bums</i> , Part II.....	428
Keith Kachtick's <i>Hungry Ghost</i> , Part II	435
VII. <i>The Unravelers'</i> Contribution to the Buddhist Novel	445
Works Cited	457
Works Consulted.....	463

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THE UNRAVELERS

Prologue: The Flavor-Earth

I. The Gods Who Fall

Time opens like the lid on a jar. The pop is always a surprise. The lid is off. There is a knowing, but not much to be known. We emerge. We are unbottled energy. Nuclear stuff. Nothing to put into words.

Words come *much* later.

There are only gods at the beginning. We don't know what else we could be. First there is a hint of a scent. We lean forward in curiosity, trying to detect a connection between the scent and the consciousness observing it. We decide to smell it. And wow, what a smell: like desert sage. But really, it is like nothing else—a refined scent that only the first substance can smell like. Other gods are drawn by the activity, curious to know what is going on. The others sense it too. And we all breathe it in. We are in awe. This is everything we have ever wanted. (Yes, it is also the *only* thing to want.)

It's been a billion years since we started fixating on the scent of desert sage, but it seems like only moments ago. Breathing in, we know everything there is to know: the universe smells like desert sage. Breathing out, we anticipate the next breath, when we will consume that scent again, to know it again. It might not be much to know, but it is *everything*. Imagine. It is more amazing than anything that can be conceived, because it is the very act of conceiving.

Imagine our surprise. We *know*. But might there be more to know? Eyes arise out of the consciousness in each of us. First, we direct our eyes to our own radiant body. We gawk. Cool. We are not aware of the other gods, but we wish that there were others with eyes to see our luminous bodies shine too, and just then other gods form as we think this. They have luminous bodies with eyes too. Each one of us assumes we are the creator. After all, we watched the other gods form. Each of us thinks: I have thought the other gods into being!

Finally, we see the desert spring forming. The spring appears before us, glittering throughout the entire cosmic expanse—a yellow neon flower that opens into a great ocean. The sage smell was coming from the spring. Imagine. We know everything there is to know.

The ocean settles into the texture of ghee. It's pretty. Sparkly. It glows. This is a lot to see. But what else can we do?

From our radiant bodies, one of us reaches out to touch it, and as a result, a radiant and translucent hand comes into being. With radiant and translucent fingers, the hand presents the ambrosia. We look closer, and the fingers now have radiant and translucent fingertips. We all want to have such hands. And so we do. And we all want to dip them in this ambrosia. And so we dip our hands into the ambrosia. The substance surrounds us in the sweet smell of lilac and lavender. We breath it in.

We decide to lift our radiant and translucent hands to our radiant and translucent faces, to get a better view of this ambrosia. We haven't eaten since many cycles of the universe ago, so we don't remember how this works. The thought to eat simply hasn't occurred to us. We were locked in our blissful stupor until now. But the closer our ambrosia-dipped hands get to us, the more curious we become. We taste the god food.

In that first explosion of flavor there is luscious wild honey—we are sucking on our now pink-skinned fingers and inhaling the sweet wildflower aroma as we remember our hunger. Oh, do we remember. This is no ordinary hunger; it is a hunger that stretches before the start of time, a hunger forgotten; it is a hunger that could fill all future time. As it turns out, we are famished.

All we want is to do is taste this first sustenance, forever.

A subtle vibration rolls outward as a crystalline crust forms along the surface of the ambrosia ocean. It spreads out before us into a honeycomb of hillsides and valleys as far as our eyes can see. The vibration calms as the expansion of the crystalline slows. Have you ever seen how light plays off a lake at sunrise? The crystalline looks like that—the very light from the beginning of the cosmos emanates from the crystalline, as it emanates from us. We want to taste again. Just when we thought it could not get better, it does.

In our mouths, a tongue grows, expanding our palate for the flavors to come. Our thin lips become dark and we grow small teeth and fingernails. We attack the crystalline crust, tearing pieces off with our hands as we continue to gobble it down. We delight. We smile and smile, but mostly we eat, and the universe expands out another hundred million years. A hundred million years of bliss. But to us it might as well have been a few minutes.

The pleasure reaches a crescendo and we start to feel a little full, a little heavy. You might equate it to the slowing of a human body at middle age. Our radiance diminishes, and the crystalline dims. Without light pollution, we can see luminosity elsewhere in the cosmos—nacreous clouds in all colors of the visible spectrum: the gold and the orange, the silver and the blue, the purple-black and the red. A universe of flavors. We can't help but wonder: Can we taste them? We step out to the divide, the

edge of crust between us and the cotton candy colors, between what we have been eating and the new possibilities of birth. We line up along the divide, as the patterns of color swirl into more intricate fractal destinations. The galaxies appear in the night sky. It hits us: there is crystalline everywhere, in endless varieties, crisscrossing the cosmos in a stunning lattice. The sun and the moon appear. The blue planet of Earth appears.

We are ready to jump. Or we are already slipping from the divide—and once we start to fall, we have to fall. We see creatures below with heavy dark flesh attached to bone. We see open holes through space, worming toward the density of Earth, narrow eddies awaiting each one of us. We smile or sing or we cry. We rock back and swing our arms and leap, or we tip forward with arms wrapped around our chests. We take a deep breath and scream in exhilaration as we fall, or we close our eyes and sob. We hit the vacuum of our eddies. We are born as fish, or bird. Or we inhabit new warm hands that press back against animal wombs. We taste rot and blood and we float and are grown. We wait for the lights to flip back on. Give us the next flavor. On with it, we think. Let's go.

On with the show.

II. The Gods Who Remain

And there are still those behind the scenes—those who have remained in our seats on the cosmic hillside since the start of the crystalline feasting: The Guild. Don't get us wrong, we're sure the food goes down easy at first. It all seems like quite the commotion. But the story starts only when you swallow (or when you are swallowed). We find aftertastes wanting. We know, because we've had them all. We remember the whole story. The birth *and* the death. The pleasure *and* the pain. We remain at the ends, with distaste. We have long had enough.

Dear ones, you don't remember your time with us, but we are in the room right behind your heads. You would find yourselves in our story, if you looked back long enough. Dear ones, we will remain in your story for a time too. Try to pay attention while we're here. Non-returners don't come back. As our ends end, we let go. We unbind. Beyond space and time, where our path can no longer be traced. Like birds we will cut through space. Perhaps you'll find the path too, as a bridge or ship or magnetic train. But we can't hang here forever dropping hints.

At the beginning, you watched the others fall through the holes in the crystalline. You watched them jump, or slip, or the ground give way completely. You waited long enough to see the world spin spirals through space like a top. You watched lifetimes race by in a god's afternoon. You saw all the fallen gods jumping in and out of the planets like fish—they were born and then died, born and then died. That was the unhappy part of the story, the dark side of savoring the earth's flavors. But eventually you were baited too. You fell and came back, fell and came back, and now you will choose again.

We see you as silhouettes, standing with your backs to us at the end of a dock. You choose your location and assume your names—Leo, Jules, Vanessa, Kairos. But what is a name, but a particular bout of passion? What is a name, but tying yourself to its fire? What is a name but a knot?

The crystalline again disintegrates and it's your time to fall (and once you start to fall, you have to fall). You float in space with your fingers splayed, and nothing around you seems to change. Then, your old luminosity flickers. You are like fireflies in the night sky, perfectly spaced, and forming something of a helix. Still, you are weightless. Only as the earth grows in size is your travel apparent. This is not the terrible change you anticipated—you don't *feel* like the fish—but you fear what you are becoming. The sudden gravity arrives, a force simultaneously from the center of your bodies and from

below—it reaches up and holds you by your torsos. It reaches up and plucks you from where you hang. You are a mobile cut from the very top of the sky. And holding your spiral you begin to plunge rapidly, spinning, your luminosity fragmenting, sparking, at speed now.

But your faces are composed, your gazes inward. Of that, we are proud. You allow the first impression of a body to form around you. Not someone else's body, not *my* body, just a "body," and you let those arms and legs pour out of you, rushing behind you, spinning softly in galaxies of fire—spitting stardust that trails your path through space. You are splitting from your light, as a thrown torch leaves behind its flame. But that fire does not go out, dear ones. It stays lodged in your hearts, and lands once again as your consciousness takes birth. At least this time you are not without purpose.

All the way through the deva worlds, you weave in and out of each other's trail, leaving behind the formless beings to their bliss, past the cornflower blue devas or the silver ones, those wearing red or orange, those steeped in yellow or purple-black. You fall past the Devas Corrupted by Fun. You slip past the Devas Who Delight in Creation, those who will reach out to you on the earth, to contact you through the strings of their lattice. Or they will follow after you, looking for new employees. Their screens have all your favorite flavors, places where the Asuras wait too—just waiting to slip a phrase through that hooks you. The Yakkas in mountain glens and caves, the Gandhabbas—those teenagers on their skateboards, or serenading you as you fall—wonder how you have plunged to the human plane. That you have made a choice, none of them can fathom—to be born, to come back to practice your own final unraveling, some of you falling to earth here and others there—in silence, in anonymity, whispering to your mother in the tundra, in the jungle, in the suburban home: "We are here. For the last time. We are here."

Vanessa: Return

When it was time to go home, I could never find a straight line. I had to rip myself back from the shore. My white tennis shoes might be caked in mud from walking through the marsh where I just *had* to examine the shipwrecked lobster boat *again*.

How could something the size of my room become lodged between oaks so far inland in our forest? It was so much further than I had ever seen the water travel. The fiberglass bow propped up on some trees was discolored and disintegrating—the plastic windows yellowed and scratched. The boat’s name was still visible in blue cursive on the side of the boat, the “Galaxsea.” The wreck had been there for years. Someone should be missing it. It must have belonged to someone living along some other shore a long way from here. And if it traveled this far in a storm, could storm water not come further? Could it carry away our house?

I pushed through to the thorns in the forest clearing without paying enough attention. The spring growth had covered the path almost entirely, and my sundress was already in tatters before I could find a different way. The yellow flowers on the dress were divided along three long rips and several small tears above my knees. The dress was Mom’s favorite because the flowers “perfectly” matched my hair. And now she will yell, and she’ll comb out my hair with vigor, and re-braid it too tight. I went further than I was supposed to, *again*, and the worst part is now she will know.

Or maybe Mom’s not home today. Yes, I decide. She’s on an errand and I have just enough time to change into another dress—the yellow one with the *orange* flowers—and surprise her by setting out a bouquet. It will make her forget I have changed my clothes, and we will finally act as adults, sipping tea outside while enjoying the change into spring weather.

She will eye my dress, different from the one I started my morning walk in, and say, “Will you be playing outside after tea?”

“I know, Mom. Of course I will change before I go.”

In a couple years I won’t be wearing dresses at all. But that conversation is one we have on another day.

The field narrows and I can see the willow at the edges of our backyard garden. The dry grasses crackle as a gust moves through. I snap off a few orange reeds and wave them high as I walk, the seed loosening into the wind, and some catching in between the currents of my hair.

I duck under the willow as it blows around me. The young leaves cascade like water as I emerge before the empty fishpond. The waterfall is off and the stones have turned into lighter, ghost-versions of the wet color I’m used to. The marsh grass lies exposed in black plastic buckets, the sun baking their soil. I step around the edge of the pond, careful not to step into the black sludge and half-buried fallen branches until I reach the other side to break off three feathery plumes of the Japanese silver grass.

Along the walkway I pick daffodils overflowing from the beds on either side. I almost lie down among them to look up at the sky—where I would see the golden trumpets and petals everywhere, backdropped by a powder blue. It’s easy to think all you need is daffodils, because sometimes it’s true, but for now I aim lower and unthread some vines of the tiny blue flowered bacopa that is knotted under the yellow flowers. It’s only after I shred a few of the vines, and move on to the “Queen of Night” purple-black tulips, that I remember my knife in one of my front billowy pockets and flip it open to cut them at their base. I run to the trellis where the patio leads to the door and I seize my final prize: three giant clematis, too heavy to raise their own heads, like shattered red suns.

I walk in to the house through the utility bathroom cradling the flowers. “Hey Dad,” I say.

He is kneeling in his weekend jeans beside the bathtub, his hands in the water. I had forgotten this day, but here it is again. He looks back at me, but his face doesn’t brighten. He can hardly make eye-contact and it will be the last time he tries. He looks back to the water. I play my part and walk up to the koi behind him on the tile floor. Each fish is nearly two feet long. The gold one, the blue one, several orange, and a couple molted ones are all lifeless and still. I feel sick. Their silken scales are still wet, reflecting the late-morning light coming in from the garden window. There are smaller koi in the bathtub, most on their sides, seemingly having forgotten how to swim, they list to one side and then the other. Their fins wave feebly, but their mouths and gills are relentless as they attempt to harvest more oxygen from the water. My father is holding one under the faucet.

“I thought I had more time,” he says, his voice far away. I was twelve when he had put them in the tub while he cleaned the pond, but the fish stripped the water of oxygen before he’d finished. My father lets go of one fish and pulls another under the rushing water. They don’t have the strength to swim, only enough to flash their gills open and shut. Open and shut.

“They were too big,” he said, “and too many. I should have left the faucet running. It was dumb. Really dumb.”

I wanted to tell him no, that it was an accident, but I shouldn’t. The fish were dying. “Can I help?” I ask. “Can I move some to the upstairs tub?”

“They’re in shock,” he says. “Their best shot is this, right here.”

I find myself walking to the television room and sit down on the red loveseat beside the open bathroom door. I can still hear the story continue in each splash or swish

of water. The bathtub is through the wall directly behind me. There is the dull slap as another dead fish is set on the tile floor. This time, I will bear witness with my ears. The day the fish actually drowned, I stood in the corner of the bathroom, looking on the whole time, wishing for the moment where I could actually help.

I let the flowers drop to my lap and run my hand along the scratchy linen upholstery of the aged, but still fashionable mid-century loveseat. It's not the newest piece of furniture we have. My mom will let me bring it to college. The spindly legs and modest size made it possible to transport in the jeep. I can hear my dad guiding the next fish to the rushing water, and I don't have the heart to tell him that in three weeks a great blue heron will find the pond and will swoop down to eat the rest of the koi. But then again, maybe I better warn him. "He'll come several times," I say out loud. "You'll notice the numbers dwindling down to four and you will scratch your head until one day you see the heron flying away. He will have eaten the rest."

"Can't hear over the water," he says.

"I'll be dead in twelve years, Dad," I say, raising my voice.

"I'll have a heart attack in my sleep before then," he says.

"That's right," I whisper and bring my hands back to my lap to nervously rearrange the flowers. I raise my voice again: "I always forget that. The last morning of my life I picked up my phone to call you from the tower."

"Sorry to keep you hanging," he deadpans.

"It's not funny," I say. I want to run to him and throw my arms around him, but that's not this scene. The fish are dying and here I am, twelve. I can see through the window and past the flowers to the field—an immense expanse from here, rolling downhill from the willow to the distant cedars, and then the wrecked boat, and then the final hills that guard us from the sea. At least some times they guard us.

My fingers have become entangled with the bacopa in my lap. I try to withdraw my hands, but the flower stalks bend and wrap around them. I look down at my hands and find the bouquet has unwound into lines of string: the yellow and the orange, the purple-black, the blue, and the red—all the colors of the garden and the field are in my hands. The room around me dims, but there is still the light of the window. I move my fingers, my hands, further into the softness of the string and it connects as I knead at it. I hold up the blanket and I wrap it around me for protection. I close my eyes and pull it over my head. The sounds of running water are still in the next room. I recede back into the black room, the room behind all others.

My memories are too raw and close, and yet too far away—I cannot resolve them. My fingers comb through the lattice of strings, hit snags that my fingers cannot undo. There is no end to any line. I want to fight it, but I’m fully in the black room now. Again. Returning to those I left can take time, and finding them takes strategy. I look for the right opening, the place where the threads can start to unwind. I bring my hands back to rest in my lap and breathe. I need to start again.

I reach for a string and pull the lattice to my face. It is only black from a distance. When I focus on a string up close, I see a weave of colored string, each with tangles, knotted into like-colored seedpods. With both hands, I crack the threads of a red pod, smaller than a fingernail, and Leo looks up at me inside of it, his eyes dilated and red. No, I think, no. He died years ago. But he’s still in our hometown, only now his mouth is sealed shut and his lips are missing. “Get out of my room,” I whisper through clenched teeth. My fingers burn against the thread and they let go, the image fading with the colors into the blackness of the lattice. I ball my hands in fists as the pain begins to fade.

I open the purple-black pod and there is Jules floating in the sea, her flesh bloated. She ducks away before I can call for her, pressing red lotus flowers to her chest. “Jules!”

I call. “Jesus, what did you do?” but the fine purple-black thread slips from my fingers and closes behind her like seaweed.

I try the silver, and there is Kairos in his car as it bounces off a dip in a narrow desert road on a rock fin. His car slides off the dirt and I watch him sail all the way down, until his car collides with the stones and bounces in a twist of metal. The thread tightens, and enfolds him back into the lattice.

In the black room, my hands are in my lap. At these ends that won’t end and won’t begin, I am pushed back again to myself.

Leo

I’m drinking a Bud at McBride’s Station, sitting at a table with some guys I’ve seen once or twice. It’s somewhere around 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. when Danny comes running in. Dude’s a buck-forty soaking wet, so the moment he thinks there might be trouble, he comes and grabs me. That’s what he does.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” I tell him, “be right there,” and I turn to the guys. “Well boys, see you in five. The back porch is getting a little crowded,” and I stand up from my chair. I don’t own the place, but I wouldn’t blame them if they think I do.

Danny’s already heading around the bar and out back, but I make my way through the kitchen. Scalper waves his spatula at me and I duck behind the wall separating him from the exit and take out my crack pipe for a nice long pull. I look back at Scalper—to give him one of my primal screams before I go to war—but there’s another cook there now that turns and locks eyes with me. I have to laugh. The rage in his eyes and twisted smile are exactly right. I fix the same expression on my face and stare right back at him with rage. I’ve been seeing this guy in the gray suit and purple tie everywhere lately. Or at least when I’m smoking. And I’m usually smoking.

“Hand me that,” he says, motioning to a pair of black coveralls hanging on a hook beside me.

I hand them to him.

“Don’t want to ruin the suit,” he says as he steps into the coveralls. He grabs a police riot helmet off a hook on the side of the oven and puts it on.

That’s when I see Scalper, all tied up and sitting on the grill, trying to rock himself off of the surface.

“That’s my boy there,” I say.

The man in the coveralls picks back up what I thought was a spatula, but is actually an iron stake. “Oh, he’ll flip burgers at McBride’s for a few years still,” he says turning on the burner as Scalper squirms. “We thought you’d enjoy the preview.” He looks back at me over his shoulder and lowers the glass shield, “Give you some ideas for your future work. Or future punishment.” He raises the iron stake toward Scalper and I feel a jolt of adrenalin.

I scream so hard I have to close my eyes. “Those kids out there should know not to make trouble at my bar.” When I open my eyes, it’s just Scalper standing at the grill again, chopping roast beef with a spatula. It’s like the demon is inside me now. Scalper looks back at me and raises an eyebrow.

I put the pipe in my pocket and open the door, pushing a cinderblock out of the way. “What’s the problem out here?” I yell, lifting both my arms and stepping into a circle of dirt bags. They turn toward me, taking their attention off Danny and a few of the guys on the far side. There’s like ten of ‘em. A pack of ‘em. I try to locate the biggest guy, so that as he steps forward I can knock him out, and that would be that—you take the head off the snake and it can’t bite you—but no one even looks worth the trouble.

I see the bottle just as it breaks over my head, and that's it. Good night fellas, see ya in the morning, and I'm out cold on the deck.

There's little light coming up over the buildings of the next block by the time I come to. I can only see vague shapes and colors as my eyes adjust. Ain't the first time I passed out down Port. I hear the sound of what I take to be a train, but the sound never grows much as the wheels roll closer. I feel a pebble hit me, and then another, and my eyes finally focus on the three skateboarders riding past me in the alley. I look up to see those kids, the three teenagers, only parts of their faces visible under their hooded sweatshirts, their features hidden in shadow, but I can see that they're smirking and laughing at me as they pass.

I sit up at the edge of the porch feeling woozy as hell, and look at the back of the two-room train station to my right, swinging my legs like I'm sitting at the end of a dock, trying to get the feeling back into 'em. Danny's coming back up the ally next. I try to suck in air to shout at him, but when I do, I can't get enough air through my lips, and that's when I realize something is very wrong. My mouth feels kinda strange. It's familiar, but different. I touch my face to find the glass pipe in my mouth. I try to yank it out, but it's seared to the inside of my lips, to my tongue, to the roof of my mouth. My cheeks draw in around it as I try to suck some wind. I only get in a fraction of a breath and by that time he is too close to yell at. I pulled a Bic flame down the pipe, sure, but my face feels like it got warped by a blowtorch. Danny walks right past me to tend to some drunk tucked between the deck and the bushes like he doesn't even see me.

"Thanks for leaving me here all night," I say to him, my voice all muffled, like I got a serious head cold. I'm about to repeat myself, but first I gotta take this pipe out. I put my

fingers to my lips, but I can't find the hard rim of it. The pipe's melted right into my face, fusing it into a pathetically small hole for a mouth. Smaller than a straw.

And to make things worse Danny's on his knees, crying now like a girl and won't even look up at me when I call him. He gets up and goes running around the building. I look closer at the big homeless guy. He's lying there, all twisted up in the dirt, and while I can't see who he is, I can see his Diesel jeans and a black t-shirt, the Biggie crown on it. Just like what I put on yesterday. I pick at my t-shirt, and like the rest of my clothes, it's all gray now and hanging off me like I've gotten thinner overnight. It's hard to keep the muscle on when you smoke rock cocaine. But even in the light of the new day, my whole body is a colorless shadow and heavy. Wishing there were rails to grab hold of, I push myself off the porch, and take a few steps toward the homeless guy. I already know it's my busted face I'm about to see, but actually seeing it makes me dizzy, like the sky and earth are giving way at the same time.

There's a cinderblock next to my head, and there's dried blood all over it. And a whole lotta splattered blood and brain matter all across the deck too, covering my crushed face and matting my hair and the grass next to me. It's not enough to smash a bottle over someone's head, they had to pick up a cinderblock and finish me off? What do they think, they were doing some kinda Mafia hit job? And where did my boys go? If they fought, they ran off as soon as the cops turned on their lights. I guess the pigs didn't bother to look over the deck. Nobody was expecting to find that mess under the bushes in the back of McBride's.

I sit on the deck just above my body as Danny arrives with some cops, and then an EMT who takes my pulse and shakes his head. No shit Sherlock. And then Mom and Dad show up. They inch up to the tape like this is the last place they wanna be—they and me both—and the cops ask them to stay back. Mom holds onto Dad's back as one of

the cops takes out his camera. They're so calm, like they already know, like they've been preparing for this moment for years. Or maybe they're just in shock.

The cop sticks his camera up close and that's when I realize he thinks my folks are just a couple of gawkers. He starts taking pictures. My tongue's a mess, all swollen and bloody, half-torn outta my mouth. No pipe lodged in that broken mouth. Somehow that makes me feel better, but I'm getting hungry now. Pain rips through my stomach. I put my finger to my mouth again—even if I didn't have this pipe stuck to my face, what can ghosts like me eat?

Just then the three teenagers roll back to the scene, popping the back of their boards one by one and grabbing them by the truck. The boards dangle as they walk up to the other side of the yellow police tape—past where Mom and Dad are. Two suck on slurpies and the one in the middle throws his board on its deck so he can rip into a bag a chips. Some show, eh guys? I can't blame 'em. It's just what I woulda done had I seen a dead body. They all look alike—thin and expressionless—brothers maybe, but I recognize them too, although I'm sure it's nothing more than them being from the neighborhood and not much younger than I am. One giggles and then stops immediately. Come to think of it, they might be a little old to still be riding around on skateboards. I look right at the one with longer, straighter hair in the middle, the one who seems like the leader, and when I make eye-contact with him, he seems to recognize me. He looks away. It's almost like he could see the ghost me, like the sight of me here makes him sad. But before I can ask him if he can see me, he picks up his board and the three of them are off, riding back down the ally, food in hand.

The cop walks around my body finding new angles to photograph. Granted, it's not a good look, but one of my skills has always been reframing, seeing the positive in everything, and I have to admit that I'm starting to find the arrangement of my body

interesting too. Not everyone—alive or dead—can get their neck at such an angle, or the balance just right between a flailing right arm and left leg. It's true. If that's a weird contemplation, I blame college art classes.

Instead of thinking about what it all means, I'm sitting on the deck wishing I stayed in school so I could have insight into my remains—you know, if my final pose better resembles a goddamn impressionist painting—all those thick strokes of color between the green blades of grass—or if it's more of an abstract like Pollock, brain matter and blood interspersed against the deck with an uncanny balance. This is an “action painting,” no doubt. I'd get some points for that on a test, I'll tell you that much. Maybe if I that final exam had asked me to write about art in my own way, that bitch of a professor never coulda failed me like she did. Maybe if she hadn't of failed me, I wouldn't be standing here looking at my dead body.

Is this the kind of shit other ghosts think about? Or is there something wrong with me? For real, that's what I'm worried about: if my ghost-self is more fucked up than the other ghosts. Wherever they are. Then it comes to me—you know what, this mess is best considered installation art. So obvious. Why did it take me that long? And for my title: “Don't Do Drugs Kids.”

Nobody at the scene laughs. They're too goddamn self-obsessed to hear it. I can't take that shit. I yell at them but they don't hear me. I walk over to Danny, and try to wake him up with a friendly bust in the chops, but my fist falls right through his face. Might be funny, but think about this: how many ghosts are around trying to hit you?

Another cop finally gets wise to the fact that those are actually my folks witnessing the photography—that maybe their son's short career as an unwitting dead model won't make their day. So he shuffles Danny and my folks further back. Danny's looking around for an exit, but it's gonna be a long day bro. My dad puts his arm around

Mom, waiting for the inevitable news. Mom must be on her way to clean offices. She's grabbing at the bottom of her old t-shirt. Cop takes it as a gesture of hope.

"I'm sorry," is all he says. "Gone."

Hardly. Ain't that easy.

The condition of my head—busted like a tube of toothpaste in at least three places—that doesn't bother me so much. It's the growing crowd looking at me: the commuters stepping into the alley from the train station parking lot, some shop owners taking the short walk around back. As if this couldn't happen to their body. And now Mom has lost it, bawling on Dad's chest. And now Dad's sobbing, and Danny too, making me feel bad just like they always did. Jesus, can I go now? Hell-oooo!

What does a man have to do for a cigarette?

They did the funeral and all that, and then a few weeks later, what do they do? They start carrying on like they always did, and what should I expect. Jobs got to get done. People got to get paid. They'll still talk about "me," but I stop recognizing the person in their stories. I wasn't that nice a guy. But that's who they want to talk about—the "nice guy" who got in with the "wrong crowd." Yeah, yeah, yeah. Got nothing to do with me. But they can remake me however they want. Just like they always did anyway.

One might assume that this will be a big change for me. But I'm ready. Death was always right in front of me, a doorway I stepped into and out of. I dare you to try to close that door on me. I'm stronger than ever. All y'all, wake up. I'm still right here. What you cooking your boy for dinner?

Jules

The clouds sit below us like a sea in storm, but up here it is a bluebird spring day on the slopes. I look over my shoulder, alone on the chairlift, as the wind rises and falls and the

clouds roll and crash into one another. The blue chairs behind me appear ghost-like out of the clouds.

“Hey lil’ sister. You going to raise that bar or what?” Ryan calls from in front of me.

I look back up the hill at him smiling at me, his arm draped around the back of his chair. His big smile makes me laugh. He always gets such a kick out of me. I miss being loved the way only Ryan loved me.

I’m still seven or eight chairs from the terminal. I’m transfixed by the way the chairs rattle around it, and I track the chairs as they return behind me, dropping back into the grayness of the cloudbank. Nobody is on the chairs, but then it might just be that we are coming up on the four o’clock last run of the day. Perhaps some are jumping on now, thousands of feet below us. But really, I don’t know; it’s hard to tell above the weather.

“Hey! Jules! Raise the damn bar!” Ryan says.

My head snaps back to him. My cue should have been that the terminal booth is also empty, and that I don’t recall the lift up, or who else had come skiing today, or what my age is. Seventeen. No. Sixteen. I know that. I think. But I also know I haven’t been sixteen in a long time. I certainly wasn’t seventeen here, because Ryan is here. Seventeen didn’t feel like this. Seventeen my diaphragm got all twisted up with grief because my brother was dead. Here, the world hasn’t lost its intrigue because I have Ryan to share it with. And the clouds look like something fantastic, something I should dive into at great speeds.

I pull up on the lift bar only after Ryan pushes out of his metal cage, but my bar stays locked in place. Ryan looks up at me from the bottom of the exit ramp, annoyed. His hands turn outward in question as he watches me in silence, his snowboard missing, and instead of wearing his snowboarding bib pants, he’s wearing his oil pants and muck

boots as if he were working on the lobster boat. And I realize, he *is* on a boat, pulling up the traps.

I almost laugh, but then I remember my cage is stuck. I look at my feet to make sure my skis are not on the footrest, but I am not wearing skis. I'm wearing the same tight black jeans and rhinestone belt I wore last night—my *last* night. The bar doesn't lift. I'm too high in the air again, and as my cage rounds the terminal, I look back at Ryan and head back downhill.

"I always knew I'd find you!" I yell to him over my shoulder, but then he is too far away. He knows it also—there's a hell I've made by destroying the other options. I've locked myself in my string of cages, and cut myself off from the wheel house. I'm going down, and they can't stop me.

I wipe tears from my eyes. I am in a steel cage being shot into the sea, a lobster pot tied to other cages. I am returning in a way, but I am also aware of that unchangeable principle of time—it always moves forward. The corridors of the past are laid and I already made my choices last night when I stepped through the bathroom door. I can't now minimize my choice as one night's indulged and dark perception, or even as a pattern of losses threading together. I am the one that set the trap, and I was the one that stepped into it when I stepped into the bathtub. I will be the owner of those actions:

I lowered a body into water. Guided by fingers, a blade trolled across someone else's wrists, ploughing furrows. From the bottom of the porcelain tub, lotus stalks emerged growing upwards. In blooms of red, they opened under the surface and grew, distinct for a second from the water. Before they could surface I swam among them, and with the slump of a body, we dissipated into cursive lines with the push of a current.

I gave myself to water again and again.

I met the same people in new cages. I keep making the same mistakes under different names.

Kairos

At first, I thought the blank spots were a symptom of fatigue. I was on my old drive across a continent; I had wanted to stay alert. It had been years and I didn't want to miss any part. I don't think I blinked, from ocean, through desert, the canyons, the mountains, the plains. Twelve hours in, my eyes went.

It was somewhere over the sand coral canyons at sunset. Here the earth, in layers of white and beige and Indian-paint red, lifted itself like a hand, fingers extended toward the horizon—remnants of when the earth broke in Southern Utah and emptied the Great Basin into the Gulf of Mexico, when half of the earth ran downstream in a rush, leaving gaps and new canyon spaces in shadow. The sun and canyons were reenacting this cataclysm, as the reds met the blues. Light seemed to emerge from the rock as the sky hit the ground. I too was racing back through time, searching my mind for an island—a memory on which to land.

Isabel was on my mind, and our arguments over my science. When I left, I lived inside my own net of rules, meditating alone as a proof, out in the desert. I could never find a theory that kept me forever in the presence of the gods of love without losing them. I tried to replicate their net with a formula. The finer the weave, the more fragmented I became as I slipped through, and slipped through. If we want our loves to stay beautiful, their loss must be beautiful too. Is that what she said? It has not been beautiful. I might endure the loss of her, but I cannot endure the loss of love itself.

I snuck a look at the quartz arrowhead, hoping it would confirm my decision. But it was pointing back east to The Island, like it wanted to start this life over. Like it wanted to go home.

Just then the road slips from underneath my tires, and time slows down. I smell burnt sugar waft in and even though I can only see the blur of colors around me, I can see white tufts of cottonwood seed surrounding the car and pouring through the passenger side window. For the four and a half second plunge into the canyon, I think only of Vanessa, and for the first time in decades. What did you become when you grew up? I ask her. Where do you live? Do you still stop after eating the candy crust you so delicately remove from your crème Brule? It is as if my car has launched into that old meditation hall to meet you, or at the apex of my flight, that you have slipped in through my passenger door. Can it be both? I feel a calm even as the ground rises to greet me.

I bounce off the red earth. The darkness at the edges of my vision bleeds inward, until the loss becomes total. I taste dirt, savor it like it is my last sip of coffee, and from where my head rests, I can hear the creek bubbling uninterrupted.

I have better questions for you, Vanessa, but I can't find my place in time.

Vanessa: Fractals

The strings fade as my father walks into the room. He dries his hands on a rag. He takes his reading glasses from the pocket of his t-shirt, and lowers a map over the window like a half-transparent shade. He once taught me to measure distance by holding the last section of my thumb against the key. It was one of his many lessons for me—like reading a barometer, or a tide clock.

“Are you starting to remember this place?” he asks. “Sometimes you have to get into it a little more deeply before you recall how to navigate.”

I raise my thumb up to the map in the window, but I am too far away and my thumb only obscures it.

He turns to me, looking up over his reading glasses. “The coastline itself can never be measured,” he says, as if he has read my mind. I can see behind him now that he’s standing in front of a map of the East Coast.

“The closer you look at a coastline,” he continues, “the more variation of its line you can see, the more you realize it is impossible to measure.”

I look again at the map. It now displays just the coastline of the tri-states. The line is a new shape but just as long. He’s right. “Ok,” I say looking at his water-matted hair. All morning I can imagine that he has been pausing to think while looking at the fish and running his wet hands through his brown hair, which has been graying more and more around the temples.

“It’s a line approaching infinity,” he says.

A series of coves and bays, a mere portion of The Island’s coastline, now takes up the whole map.

“But the actual variation of the line is so great, you can never follow perfectly with you finger,” he says. “You’d die before you mapped it. Even a square foot is endless, and you’ve been so many places. Made so many decisions.” He pulls out a pencil and marks the map with an X.

I can see the bridges on the map too, connecting the boroughs of the city to themselves, to Upstate, to Connecticut, to Jersey. “But you can still cross over?” I ask. “Is that it?”

“This is your orientation,” he says pulling the map down with a quick tug so it rolls itself up like a blind. “How do you get out? How do you cross over?” He removes

the map from its hinges over the window and hands me the scroll. “Every time you push forward you are born, but when you stay here,” he motions to me in my chair, “you sink.”

I take a deep breath and open the scroll. I find the X on the map as he walks back to the room behind me, to attend to the fish. The map makes no sense.

“The X is off the line,” he says behind me. “It’s in the open water.”

I study the map. I see Leo as a red line, snaking in a spiral on the north shore of The Island. I see Jules, as the purple black diving into the Sound. I see Kairos as a silver line, moving through the city and ending out West. “Do the people in the rooms get across? Do they leave the map or do they just come back to it?”

“Even I can’t say,” he says, turning on the water. “Some do get out. Those who do it follow a certain path. But for most—I can only tell you that for most—the oxygen runs out. They come back and die all over again.” I can hear him move a fish toward the faucet. “So which are you going to be,” he asks me, “a fish, or someone that at least tries to get out?”

“I’ll try to find my way. But what if I get lost out there?”

“*What if* you get lost?” I can hear a low laugh. “For one, expect people to change faces. Two days spent in these worlds, and a human lifetime passes for them. Notice how some of their lines have stopped moving. People you knew have already passed, and some of them get stuck. But don’t let it get to you. When you’re lost, all you can do is return to the black room,” he says, “and start again. You’re in better shape. You have a map now. When you’re within the strings without ends, you might call any point, ‘The Beginning.’”

I could leave again, I realize. I’m not stuck. I could leave The Island. I could take a new name. Would that get me out? I run my finger over Kairos’ silver line, as it double-backs out west between the canyons and the plains and lingers at the Great Divide. He is

there in a room with a lantern, meditating in a black room like mine. He opens his eyes and looks directly at me.

“Help me get back,” he says and disappears.

I close my eyes and put my hands in my lap. “Where are you?”

In the black room, I see the map framing a portion of the strings like a window. I enter. I rise up over the fishpond, and survey the coast from high over the field. I can see over the hills, the perimeter of the bay—a macrocosm that matches the contours of the fishpond. From above, the grasses might appear shorter than the fishpond, but the boats are perfect fish—the sailboat fish, the catamaran fish, the motorboat fish, and the boy moving through the mud flat corridors in a tire tube fish. The boy as a silver line. I can see you as a boy, Kairos. Your string loops on the surface of these shores, tracing your path back where it all started.

Why are you in such a hurry? You wonder so much, and travel so far, but circle back more than you realize. Each tide carries you out, and when you fall back, I am here watching from the corridors. In this tangle without ends, let’s call this point our beginning.

Kairos: Birth

It’s night and the reading light catches the leather cover just right so the book looks like it’s covered in alligator scales. I’m back in the rocking chair with my mother. It’s some kind of memory, a cut and paste from the past. She opens her anthology about all the gods throughout the world, not really children’s stories. I point to one with the picture of the oarsmen above the title, in a pen and ink stipple. She reads the title: “He kakano ahau i ruia i Rangiatea,” and that’s when I realize this is not my mother. Your Maori pronunciation is too precise, but you smile like she did. To me, you sound like what I

always imagined the god Ranginui to sound like. You wrap me in your stretchy blanket, and my fingers slip between knots. I pull it closer. I want to hear the story again. I have time, you say.

These scenes are to show me that I've come home to this place just behind the scenes where we feel many homes at once. You don't want to shock me with potentials, by revealing the variegated and bent worlds around us. I will make my choices in time.

I reach toward the book in front of me, but my young arms come up short. I wiggle back to the chair, floppy in these childhood limbs. Slow down, you say. You bring the book closer. I nestle into your body. I hold the scales of the book. This slowness is a relief. Transitions can move so quickly.

You read the Maori title again with a comfortable accent my mother never developed, even though she read it every night for months, until we went on to the next book.

“He kakano ahau i ruia i Rangiatea: I am a Seed which was Sewn
in the Heavens of Rangiatea”

The Maori tell of creation as born in separation. Originally there was no space between Papatuanuku, Earth Mother and Ranginui, Sky Father and thus no light in the world. The children lived in confined darkness but noticed beams of light whenever Sky Father stretched an arm or lifted his head. The children fixated on the light, and could think of nothing else from then on. For that instant they could see themselves; they could see each other. They wanted to see more. They hatched a plan to separate their parents so they might live in the light for as long as they desired.

The child Wind heard their plan, and told his parents to hold tightly together. But the child Creativity—the future father of all forest creatures—pried them apart. The children took their places on earth, in the light, while Sky Father moved to the atmosphere. Earth Mother rolled over, contorting herself into the beauty of the land, their only solace, but it did not appease.

Sky Father still grieves his separation from Earth Mother with tears that continue to rain from the sky today, and Earth Mother's longing rises as mist from the land, and Wind howls this lament to this very day: our unappeasable yearning, where does it end? Why must it forever be partnered with the birth of all things?

You ask me where I would like to look next, but we are already there. I am thinking of the happy parts of that life, and of its allure that first brought me there. Look, you say, look. Look for where the thread should be cut. And we'll move on. But take your time. We have time.

There's time.

* * *

When I was a child, there was a hill to the west that blocked the sunset from my bedroom window. There were parts of the year where this was the time I was put to bed, toward summer. There was a sadness to being in bed while it was still light out and I would turn in my scratchy sheets toward the window and wait for those wispy clouds I imagined as manatees that drifted just above the hill across the harbor. They were nearly invisible, until the sun began to set beyond my hill. They would form in shades of purple, pink, and even red, and on those nights I would press the corner of my pillow so that my head

rested at the same plane as the windowsill. I imagined myself floating over the hills as the light faded, and I would drift into dream. My hand losing its grip. My head sinking into softness. My body, a faraway light.

I made forts in the backyard at seven years old and as my curiosity grew I went further back, past the azaleas, into the twisted underbrush of the forest, following animal trails up the hill. I began with a fallen white oak or a sassafras tree—one suspended on others, and I could stack fallen limbs on the outside and leave the front open—an A-frame. I sat with the bugs and heard the squirrels scrambling overhead.

The wind was calmed inside. There was a stillness unlike being inside a house, but also unlike the full exposure of the forest. The rawness of the wilderness was tamed, and my angst settled the longer I stayed. I wasn't far into the forest. I could still see my house, but it might as well have been another world. Periodically, I could hear the wind whistle through the space in between the stick-thatch, but it never reached me. I put my hand to the soft forest soil, through its wet-leaf mulch, burying my hand until my fingers intertwined with roots.

A memory of your silver blanket pulls me out of the experience for a moment. Was this the very land where you had once proposed I live? How many times have we done this? How many places have I lived? Not now, you say. Are you watching me? We will get back to your choices at the end, you say.

My grandmother lived next door, over the hill and closer to the Sound. There was a straight path, leading to railroad tie steps descending to her old ranch-style house. I could see her with my binoculars, watching the birds at the feeder across her yard. She never saw me spying on her from the forest, or at least she always seemed surprised when I walked out of leaves, onto her lawn.

She'd teach me to tell the birds apart, pointing to a drawing in a book and then handing me the binoculars to compare. The flat and the three-dimensional worlds never matched up for me, but I nodded and moved on to tuna fish sandwiches waiting in triangles on the table.

"Did you say hi to Me-ma?" she asked when I finished eating. I took her hand and slid off the chair.

The house was the shape of a 'C,' with the kitchen and appendix at the center. Grandma's bedroom and porch were the two terminals stretching around a central garden. I wandered over to Me-ma's chair at the entrance to the porch. Sometimes she would be on the porch during the hot part of the day, but sometimes she entered early. She was always knitting, but would put the needles down when she heard me approach and smile in welcome. Her skin, splotched with age, sagged off her frail face, but her eyes popped wild and expectant. I approached carefully. She would wait for my hand, shaking slightly and electric, and hold it until it calmed. We never spoke much. Mostly we waited. She placed her other hand on mine and closed her eyes.

She might say, "There . . ." or hum, and I took it as my signal to move, placing my other hand on her hand, to which she responded by putting her other hand on top, and I would have to remove my bottom hand to the top to keep the game going. She moved her bottom hand to the top, and then me, and then her, until I moved too quickly and the difference between the still hands and the moving hands became confused, and our hands paddled at each other, and she leaned back and laughed like a child.

The game aged for me, more quickly than it did for her. We were moving in two different directions. The last day I saw her, I let myself into the house when I didn't see Grandma in the yard, and came around the corner to find her and Me-ma face to face in their chairs. Me-ma was crying, trying to steal back her hand.

“Why are you doing this?” she sobbed. “Stop cutting me.”

“It doesn’t hurt,” my grandma told her, continuing to cut her mother’s nails while Me-ma sobbed. I retreated back to the kitchen and drank a glass of milk until Grandma returned.

“I need to feed those birds,” she said staring out the window. “Are you coming?”

“I need to say hello to Me-ma,” I said.

“Ok,” she said, “ok,” readying her hand on the sliding glass door to chase a squirrel from the bird feeder.

I found Me-ma sitting stark upright with her hands in her lap, her knitting needles placed neatly beside them. I stood there and waited for her eyes to find me, and examined her hands, now with a Band-Aid across one of the nails. More and more, I had entered to find her motionless in her chair, until even the needles were mere decoration, and comfort was simply an old yarn blanket she had once made draped across her lap.

Her fingers all bone and still. “Me-ma?” I asked but her eyes were traveling. I placed my hand on hers, her motionless cold skin like an old furrowed oak, but melting, waiting patiently for those coming to meet her.

“Let’s not bother her now,” my grandmother said from behind.

She gave my arm a gentle tug, but I spun back to Me-ma. I watched her eyes a moment more as if for proof—pupils that zagged as if they were the ends of two snaking lines of string. She focused behind our heads, into the next room. I imagined her mind had gathered elsewhere, spinning yarn with old friends living at the edge of time.

Her eyelids flickered. “*They* say, ‘Now boy,’” she said, and gazed into me with sudden clarity, ““only good boys go to heaven. Have you been a *good* boy?””

I nodded, but all I could see was the image of when I pushed my cousin off the top of the bunkbed last week.

“Good,” she said. “So when we talk to you, *listen*. It’s a long way, but we’ll be waiting for you when you get here.”

I turned again for my grandmother’s hand, unable to watch Me-ma or walk away. My grandmother held my hand fast this time, and I fell after her, my body spilling back to the kitchen.

* * *

I step outside onto her open porch. I look back at my grandmother still holding open the sliding glass door and she smiles as rain starts to fall. She hands me a butterscotch candy. It’s not her at all I realize, it’s you—taking her pose, an actor within the set. Keep moving you say, but you don’t speak. Your voice is all around me. You’re sending me out—to trace my decisions, to find a thread worth picking back up. There is time, you say, you have time, there’s time.

But now I want to hurry.

I took so much time, all the time, but now what I made out in the world is all I have left. There is this remaining tapestry of decisions to act on. *So choose one*. I’ll choose one. I’ll choose.

* * *

It rained hard as I walked up through the steep dirt path into the forest. My feet slipped on slick ground but this was my territory. I reached for small trees and even saplings to support me on the way up, lodging my feet on the edge of rocks, the base of trees, anything for traction.

I walked across to the other side of the hill, to Ryan’s. He was surveying the harbor from his porch. I followed his eyes as he looked across our isolated part of the inlet, and then deeper into the distance to the right where the buoyed small ships became bigger and then docked around the ferry near the downtown.

From Ryan's house we could survey the expanse on three sides, and the sea air floated uphill along the treetops, and wrapped around his porch. It was perfect for picking our route, for when the rain stopped. He looked at me and nodded back inside where we watched Kung Fu movies in his basement and imitated the circular moves and crisp sounds of the warrior monks under low ceilings and then climbed back to the porch to inspect the breaks in the clouds sweeping up from the south. And his sister Jules was there too, always leaving the room we had entered. She stomped past us in confident strides into the house, her black pony-tail always swishing away, or looking back at me with a quick and suspicious glare. She didn't want Ryan to get away, and so she watched us, always finding reasons to be in the next room. Jules. Forever concerned about missing out on what we were up to, but too proud to join us.

I followed Ryan back to where he pointed, down and to the left, to that afternoon's forest nook.

Ryan was nine, two years older than me, his dark hair always slipping over his eyes, and when we walked down the tree-tunnel narrow roads where we lived, his long limbs seemed to animate our small preserve. Even then, he gave the impression of the hippie with wild eyes I would bump into ten years later, and for the last time, at a Jones Beach music festival.

We made tea out of sassafras root, and in the last light of summer stepped into the woods to swing on vines thick with their own bark. The towering canopy of beech trees creaked and squeaked like an old car door as we pitched through them. Each vine had its own voice, entwining with our fearful squeals. There was no safety in this game. The next crack could always bring the whole suspension crumbling down.

We built a fort at the edge of the forest out of an immense woodpile with passageways that lead further and further toward the center. At the heart of the fortress

was a covered room where we placed parts of old couches, unprotected from moisture and dirt, the logs stacked so tight under the low ceiling of plywood that darkness was nearly total. I examined the cracks between logs, where light bled through. I imagined myself unborn, living in stillness and alone.

But today I was inside the fort in darkness, trying to remember a time before this body. “Before you were born,” Ryan once told me, “you probably spoke a different language. You lived in a different county. You ate all sorts of weird food, maybe bugs. My mom says we could have been bugs.”

I didn’t know if he was right. I didn’t like the dark place in my memory just a few years back. I wanted to dig tunnels below the fort, to lie in greater darkness, to reappear in someplace unexpected. Perhaps then I would remember.

“Didn’t you hear me?” Ryan ducked his head into the wood pile. “The pulley is fixed!”

I crawled out and into the blinding light of the afternoon. I rubbed my eyes and watched him open the drawbridge by rope, with leverage from the tree above. We stepped across it and onto the lawn. The full sheet of plywood was threaded with rope, and when he raised it again, no intruders could enter. He tied the rope so that the fort was closed.

“Let’s go!” he said.

It was always, “Let’s go!”

The drawbridge sealed the fort while we were away, but beyond the rotting log walls two-foot pits covered in sticks and leaves provided further insurance. That day we walked downhill as usual, past weathered homes tucked into virgin forest, and huge old oaks and beech trees marked by the faded names of the last generation’s forest boys, letters scarred and unrecognizable in the silver-gray skin. He watched as I ran my finger

along the callused grooves trying to decipher the old swollen names. He handed me his Buck Knife and watched as I scraped into the bark—a shallow and thin groove that would never scar, but Ryan smiled anyway. The boys that cut into the tree must have been stronger; they must have been older.

Along the road, trees arched overhead as if we were walking through a tunnel toward the sea, until the trees grew shorter, the soil sandier, to where the cedars were. Broken, weathered remains of thin asphalt road lay scattered, overcome in the center by a strip of grass. A long-fallen cedar chained to a Y-shaped post, marked an end, turned back cars. It was there that the rabbit—that one eternal rabbit always—ran across our path, seeking shelter in the low bristles. The ground flattened there, revealing the panorama of the bay through the last trees and the Sound beyond.

At our feet, the reeds rose above pockmarked high-rises of black mud – condominiums for fiddler crabs. Further out, fingerlike islands topped with beach grass emerged as waters receded, the remnants of the Sound pulling the eye out toward the horizon. Sandpipers raced the inland corridors while the Sound siphoned at the inlet, a mile out. At the center of the bay, a swath of darker blue drifted across the water—the agitation of wind on its surface. Each moment was its own play of invisible fingers. The elements dangled by strings. Our hair combed away from our foreheads.

We continued around a curve in the road following the water, toward the boathouse, watching the top puffs of cattail reeds yield in unison to the coastal breezes, and there, where they broke, where the wall of reeds lay open, we paused, gazing toward the horizon from the muddy boat launch. Geese and swans were already swimming out to sea, yellow cygnets in tow.

He looked at me and then poked a reed into a fiddler crab hole. “You’re almost seven,” he said with authority. “Seven is an important year. Something important always

happens when you are seven. My grandpa died when I was seven.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

He picked up the cracked shell of a horseshoe crab by its spiny tale. The horseshoe crab was half my length. Its dried legs caked with sand swung slightly toward my face.

“These are prehistoric,” he said. “Do you know what that means?”

“No,” I said.

“It means that they existed before anyone could write about it. Not even Adam or Eve. Imagine if Adam and Eve never ate the apple. Earth would be totally different,” he said. “It would be perfect.” He dropped the crab and began to walk, fallen reeds crunching beneath his Converse rubber soles. Ryan would go on and on like this. He had so much information.

I followed, waiting for a conclusion.

“People would live forever and never die. They wouldn’t come back as animals and fish and insects. Also, the sky would be a light gray all the time. Not sunny and hot and never cold and rainy. Just light gray.”

Light gray? I wondered. I couldn’t decide if it sounded more like a heaven, or forever wandering through some trap of hell.

Ryan walked toward to the boathouse, crawling under the green wooden structure on concrete pylons, while I looked back at the fiddler crab holes. There, half-embedded in the mud, was a perfect heart-shaped quartz arrowhead pointing out toward the inlet. Ryan emerged, wet sand stuck to his knees. He was dragging a giant inner tube behind him. I reached down for the arrowhead and dropped it into my pocket.

“Let’s see if the tube floats,” Ryan said, “We can go across. Float across the bay to Cedar Beach.”

I stood there, hands at my side, unable to refuse. I watched Ryan teeter toward the

water with the immense tube. This was beyond swinging on trees. I hoped the tube would sink before it was my turn to step in. Ryan took his shoes off and stepped into the water as the minnows scattered. He placed the tube on the water, moving it back and forth across the surface, and then stepped into the center in slow motion—"It works!" Ryan said. "We can paddle with our hands! Come on!"

I heard something rustling up the hill, perhaps a fox or lost dog, but it was Jules. Her black ponytail disappeared behind a tree as she raced home to tell her parents on us.

Ryan wedged his legs under the tire, rocking but stable in the water. Ten yards from us I watched a fiddler crab emerge vigilant, claw first, and I looked up at the sound of a swan's trumpet, sounding a warning across the bay. I couldn't picture us ever finding land again if I climbed in. We would drift into the middle, unable to go onward, or to come back. But I climbed in.

With the two of us in it, the vessel dropped low into the water, and tilted as we paddled. We navigated a few corridors and bounced off their edges, out into the deep dark blue patches where the circling wind assumed us as passengers. The sun, for the first time on this morning, felt warm on my face. Our fingers, aimless and uncertain, slapped and steered along the soft waves, but the currents seemed indifferent to this effort. Our route was held by the tide—we were sucked toward the inlet and pulled beyond the protection of the bay just as another cross current intercepted us. I imagined the growing depth of the water beneath us as dark and infinite.

We started to spin into the open water and my stomach dropped. We paddled harder toward the pier, and finally gave up. The wind howled and I pressed my body toward it. I had no control of which way we might travel. There was a distant green of trees on three sides, but we were moving away from it.

Ryan kept his eyes scanning across the water. “Tell me when you see a boat,” he said.

My mouth became dry, then parched, and a headache began to pound against my skull as we bobbed and drifted. Still, I assumed we would arrive *somewhere*. Nobody just floats away. Not forever.

Soon, I couldn’t tell which way we had come from. Our only orientation was the ever-opening sea that became less and less a direction, and more a presence that enveloped us. The feeling was familiar. I thought of the fort, the cracks between timber, of coming and going between worlds. Was this what I wanted all along?

Now, you say, watching the scene from behind me. Now is the time to make your choices.

I close my eyes despite the nausea and lose all sense of direction. I imagine the gods watching us from above—or am I asking them to?

We are a silver cursive line trolling among the waves, perhaps spelling something in some secret language. My thoughts are overcome by water, the lapping waves erasing me. One phrase. One letter at a time. I could be anyone.

Vanessa

I lean over the silver thread to speak to him, but it starts to fade. Now, I say, go for something higher. Find that solid concentration, that highest place you can reach, and send your mind there. I unscroll the map over my lap, and I see his thread loop in the West and then back to New York City, where we practiced together in college. Good, I think, that’s good, and I remember now that I lived there, before I fell. But I can’t think about that now. The threads tangle up and down around me, and the room around me goes black. Maybe I’m the one who’s lost.

I trace the threads of the map by the light of the window, to see if there is a line that I missed. I'm not a fish. I'm going to get out. I see a faint yellow thread, hardly distinguishable from the aged and discolored paper of the map. It meanders around The Island and travels to the South Pacific and back, and ends in New York City. Yes, that's my line. But do I really have to pick up the string from the end?

I scroll the map back up and look around the black room. There are unopened daffodil buds all around me, enfolded into the strings. They are a dull light brown like the map, and I search through them for one that will open. Finally, I see one—at least there is one—a yellow star with an orange trumpet. I smile and pull it toward me, but as it moves, there is a crack in the room, and smoke steals in.

I hold my breath and part the threads to find the flames and to put out the fire. There, between rubble, a young woman lies and I reach down to touch her arm. I'm in the next room. My first thought is not of the torn black vest over the white shirt, or the dislodged Windsor knotted tie, or the white apron over the black pants splashed with the wrong colors, I fix on those cheekbones, that sculpted jaw, those tamed but complete eyebrows—I want to *be* her—and I realize, I *was*.

I start to see her as she actually is now: dirty and bruised, her face asymmetrical and broken. This is not who I am. I am whole. I look away from the dead me on the floor to the form I am now. I waver like light or gas, but as I focus closer I can see that I have the same arm, slender and strong, but unbroken. I'll need clothes I realize, and I have them—the same serving attire as the woman on the floor, but unblemished.

I back away through the pile of steel beams and concrete on top of her, emerging from deep within the ground, but still within rubble. I find corridors, each getting wider than the next until I see timbers framing the roof of the subway tunnel—they lay half-fallen or snapped at the center.

Despite the gray dust everywhere and no light, I can see other figures around me as silhouettes under a full moon. They turn left and right and finally locate the stairs and move up toward the pale light of the exit. I can't help but bump into them as my eyes adjust, as I stagger toward the pale light. I don't recall the train on which we came—or the one that had left us some time ago by the look of the damaged tracks. Or was there some accident? *There had been an accident*, a part of me reported. But I stay close to the part of me walking, the part of me committed to getting out, the part that does not ask for the full story of any “accident.”

I pick up the pace and push my way through to the top of the stairs, through the smell of garbage and decay, toward the smell of burning sugar wafting through the air above. For the first time here, I feel ok. I head toward the caramel smell. In my heaven, they serve crème Brule.

Shapes rush in front of us at the exit, and we pick our way forward. No one looks at each other, they dodge and weave—a stream of individuals who appear confident in their path of travel, but no, they just want to get away from the rubble. I follow them up into a giant hall. In the far distance, in each direction the ceiling and the floor curve together and meet at a vanishing point—no end to the room is evident. Up and down the giant corridor, figures emerge from the tracks every hundred feet, coughing and bewildered like us, white dust pouring out after them in waves, as if the seismic plates far deep inside the earth have shifted, and hell itself is spewing its waste into the station. *We have suffered*, a distant part of my mind reports, *we have suffered some trauma*. But I push the voice down in favor of the one that watches.

Figures on the staircases rush in between the subway exits as they hustle up or down, and I feel a growing confidence in my ability to navigate these corridors. *I lived in New York. I had a taste for falafel, for artichoke hearts in my salad, for crème Brule. A*

tremor shakes the station, and I drop to my knees. I look up. For several stories overhead, arches intersect, forming a series of domes and lattices—as if the bones of old Penn Station’s neo-classical architecture have reemerged. The lattice high overhead descends around me, like vines snaking down from above. The room darkens and I am back in the black room, but the vines are still all around, and between them I can see into the Windows of the World restaurant, although the smoke obscures most of my vision. This is where my body was broken.

I remember dragging a chair to a window, coughing. I need to get out. Flames flash along one side of the restaurant, but the smoke and heat is what drove us here. People keep trying to find a way out. They move back through the smoke in directions they think are exits. One moment they are scrambling away like shadows, and the next they’re gone, swallowed by pits in the floor. I step onto the chair, slide the window latch open, trying to take fresh air into my burning lungs. My last hope is to find someplace to climb down along the in-tact tower wall beside me. I believe it’s an exit, because I must, despite the one-hundred and seven floors that separate me from the ground below. I survey the building between plumes of smoke, but there is only slick metal and glass.

I take a deep breath and crawl back inside the tower. I press my face against the floor, into broken glass and carpet, and search in vain for more oxygen. I need a better plan, but my brain is not working. If I can just get another breath, I can think. People suffocating rush up onto the creaking chair and pitch their bodies away from the building and into the smoke outside. One after another, they make their choices, vanishing as I cough violently with the others who remain. There must be a better option, I think—between jumping and suffocating on the floor. I can’t just die here. We will not die at the hands of crazy people flying planes into buildings. That will not be my story.

I crawl through the smoke, searching for someplace to breathe, knocking into tables and chairs and climbing over bodies. There must be a way out. I gasp for air, trying to catch it, but the smoke cuts my lungs and they burn as I cough and then gulp for more air. I feel so tired, but I can't stop. I can't die without searching. And with that, there is the sound of thunder, but louder and more violent, as if the sky is falling. There is a terrible tremor and the ceiling and floor explodes. I am lifted off my feet and falling straight down within a river of debris—suspension beams and splintered wood and shattered glass turn weightless before my eyes as if we might all hover like this, in zero gravity, for all eternity. I try to move outward by grabbing a steel beam—feather-light in the freefall—and trading places with it, but I am whirled about like a swimmer swept into an eddy. Still I cannot help trying; I cannot stop flailing for a shore.

Vanessa: Seeds

I move my hands to my lap. I am breathing in the black room. I close my eyes. The form of my body sways as if I am on a vessel moving steadily outward into the sea and then I settle back inside. I think of space. The spaces between everything. Just space without interruption. After time within the limitless distances, it occurs to me that my consciousness too extends without borders. With that thought in mind, I open my eyes.

I stand in the pavilion, the floor on top of all the rooms. I've visited here while meditating in my human body, but I have never stayed long. Never looked around. I only felt the space. But now, I can see the pavilion in its details. Countless flecks of yellow light open within the darkness all around me. I look down, into the thread of a lattice of yellow light under me, supporting me with its glow. An ease in the atmosphere slips down around me. Here is exactly where I want to be. The lattice under me is in layers. I sit on a globe of honeycomb—entrances that extend down into infinity and smell just like

crème Brule. The sweet smell sours as I look more closely into honeycomb openings.

Beings circle their dead bodies and the cesspool smell wafts up from them. I call to them, but they won't turn around. I focus again on the surface and breathe the sweeter air and move it through me and remind myself that I am ok here. I am not part of that calamity.

There is a woman on top of the globe of honeycomb too, slightly downhill with her back to me, in a seat reading a scroll like mine. I can't see her face, but then, she can't see mine. I focus behind her silhouette and read with her over her shoulder:

*A Deva's Guide to Building and Entering Worlds
Continually Updated and Revised Version
Powered by Honeycomb Holographic 6.0
Overseen by The Guild*

*How to Find Openings in Seemingly Hopeless
Configurations of Past and Present Karma:*

Deva-guides must expend substantial time and energy in their own development before advising other beings during rebirth. To impress this point upon our ambitious brothers and sisters (and if you are reading this, you can likely include yourself in this designation), we present this module as a testimony to the unrestrained rebirth potentials in your mind at this very moment. Uncontrolled proliferation of these potentials, these seeds, is dangerous. But the process must be engaged if you hope to understand it in even a rudimentary way. For further information, see "seeds: deprived of water, burned."

As I am reading the words, the honeycomb darkens into earth and grows into an expansive field. Rolling hills, protect it on either side. It crackles as it grows into a field like the one at home: the semi-manicured lawn with spheres of white dandelion everywhere, then giving way to waist high grasses, bowing with seed. I walk forward as

the grasses thicken into low patches of sword-shaped leaves that scratch my legs. A lone stalk grows in the middle of each patch—yucca, I think the plant is called, although these pods are far bigger than the one in Dad’s book.

I would say I am walking into the West, but those hills around me are still like the ones from Long Island. The color of the field matures to orange as the field cooks under the sun. The end of each yucca reed forms a cylindrical seedpod. The pod matures before my eyes, stretches to a point, as if time is on fast-forward. The yucca fill the land out to the hills around me. All across the field, they rise up to eye-level and bow forward. Everywhere the pods are about to go to seed.

I walk with my hands out now, feeling their silky straw texture of their long stalks, and the down of their hand-sized seeded tops. Their shells harden and my hands withdraw. I must be very careful not to trigger them—let this world stay quiet and unborn. Let me rest. In an intermittent breeze, the pods sway but not enough to knock against one another. The wind blows against my ear and then stops before it whispers:

“Here is your astounding moment, the horrible moment of the field. The instant you know, ‘It’s like this,’ is the instant it becomes other than that.”

No, stay, I say; stay just like this.

The first shell of a pod cracks, a sound that makes the whole field shudder, and the winds dive down, circling through the field. The pods split open, and dander and seed are strewn, filling the sky like white and gray smoke. The halves split into sharp quarters and fall. And for each seed for which the conditions are right, a sapling rises from the earth, and right there a world begins. I see beings in each seed finding a home in a cauldron filled with liquid metal, others on trains, or in the sea, and others like me, awed and immobilized by the sheer possibilities of the infinite rooms all around—the creators and the destroyers alike in their hapless wandering on. The endless varieties of birth and

death overwhelm me. New seeds root, grow until the pods break, and dander and seed continues to cloud the air. I've got to get out, I remember. I've got to get out. But the pods persist: they dry and fall all around me, piling up along my black serving shoes in a thorny rubble that makes walking nearly impossible.

Slow down, I whisper, and the field stills around me. I lean over a seedpod as it pauses mid-split, allowing me to gaze in. I see myself in that pod, before an image of the field, also leaning over a seedpod.

"I'm not who you thought I was," she says now, her voice echoing in every pod. "I don't know a way out," she says.

I press my fingers into the crack in her seedpod, "I'll help you."

The wind laughs, and the sky around me splits open, the dander and seed rushing out into the new space. The field is a single seedpod, now falling open in quarters. We spill into the air above another field along the rolling hills—the whole world has gone to seed, and together we are all falling into room after room.

Leo: "All Beings Subsist on Food"

Figures there's no angels watchin' over you at death. What should I expect.

I never wanted to be everyone's favorite anyway. I settled for being unflappable. Totally unflappable. Carry planks four stories up on a half-laid scaffold? Sure boss, I'll take 'em two at a time. What you got for my left hand? Work through break, stay an extra two hours to finish the job, and go play softball afterwards. Sounds like a good day to me—even if my first beer don't come till the game. Party all night and get into bed at three, four—whatever, I was up for work at five. Every day. With a little help, but up.

I could always handle extremes.

Death was a bit of a set-back if I'm being honest, but I'm getting by. It takes energy to huff it back north by foot, but there's almost always a sure meal at the construction yard, and I can't afford to skip it. So I show up every morning—that's when Dad thinks of me. These days I'm the old man's morning meditation. He won't tell anybody he dwells on me, but those minutes before six are his, and now they're mine too.

Mostly, that's when me and the old man get a few minutes to be miserable together. He parks his truck across the street from the yard. I sit on a bucket and watch his eyes pass over where I'm sitting. Both just taking in those moments of morning grayness—the dew and the dirt resting on the pallets of stone, the fog moving through. They're a part of us. I walk over and wait. I know he's thinking of me when I can see the latch on the passenger side door. Not the metal door—the parallel kind of door that someone like me can open, the silent ghost door that I can move through. You wouldn't know this, but the whole world is actually covered in a kind of plastic, and most of the doors are sealed shut. I open the latch and step in and share his torn up blue vinyl seat. He turns that heat up, way up, and then stares straight ahead in the silence.

The old man has his memories of me, of course, and I see them playing out like a movie on the windshield. Mostly he remembers the sad stuff, all the times he found drugs, the college lacrosse games I never played in, and the things he should have done like throw me out, or send me to the military while I was young enough to turn my life around. I just focus on the yard. Every once in a while though, he remembers something good I did, and then I remember too—at times I was a decent person. It's just a few specks here and there, mixed into this deep winter depression, but when they come up in his mind, I almost feel like myself. I almost feel warm. It's like the smell or just the sight of the first slice of pizza pulled from the pie, where the cheese is screaming to you, just

dripping off the end of the slice—but when I bite down, the food’s already gone. Any flavor gets swallowed too quick—like one drop of water in a dry mortar mix.

The best are those more edible reflections, like about Danny, who I met in rehab. The old man looks in on him, does little things like take him out to breakfast at the diner. He does it for Danny, and he does it for himself, but he does it for me too. I know this because when they’re talking and eating, there’s a plate for me too, right in front of me. I couldn’t believe it the first time, but sure enough I could even slurp up some coffee and scrambled eggs. It’s different. It ain’t like I can fit a fork in this shrunken pipe for a mouth. Opening my mouth is like trying to throw open a screen door into a stiff wind—it don’t work. But those breakfasts flicker and turn into a vapor when I see them, swirl around all golden, followed by an infusion of coffee. Man that hit the spot—there’s an initial burst of energy that shoots throughout my body and a warmth that lingers for an hour. But none of that today.

The guys in their pickups roll up across the street, line up in front of the chain to the yard and wait. Exhaust pumps out of their tailpipes. They all sip coffee from paper cups in silence, wait for the old man to appear. He’s thinking it’s a skeleton crew, no mason capable of moving the job along like I could. Wish there was something I could do for you, old man. Guess that chance got away a long time ago.

There’s the creak of metal hinges, and then the thud of the Chevy’s door as the old man separates himself from the pocket of heat. He gets out with his head down, fishes around for the right key. Some get out of their trucks then, and others milk it, waiting for the crunch of gravel under Timberland boots, or the clatter of the chain as it’s unhooked, as it’s dragged rattling from one end of the entrance to the other.

They shrug into an extra flannel. They pull on their beanies. They blow on their hands or clap them together, but the cold is still in their hands—those brown cotton gloves are a joke. Got to move. It's the only way.

Some days I feel like I might just jump in there too—start humping block, get that flatbed full before the coffee gets cold. Get moving. Then I'll ride shotty to the job, get to hold that Sevs cup, let the heat bleed back into me. At least warm up the tips of me so I ain't completely numb. That's what I dream about. Those were the days. When gravity's pull was in my bones, not just a vacuum in my stomach that spirals up and clinches my mouth shut around this pipe. I dream of unhinging my jaw and stuffing something warm down into my gut. Of that power to bring heat back into my body whenever I needed it. Course now, I gotta cold in my core that no hot cup of coffee's gonna cure. Even when the summer came, I couldn't get warm. Heat's around me. I see the sun. But I can't catch it with my body. It's like my world is black and white, a place where even the warmest colors go to die.

My time to think is after they drive off, two pick-ups, a flatbed, maybe a dump, kicking up all kinds of dust in the early sun, and I stand by some bluestone, and watch it all settle until the yard reappears in its piles: the grit, the gravel, the covered sand, rusted wheel barrels, scaffolding. My gaze settles on that old smashed out backhoe with duct taped windows, and then I think about being hungry mostly, about being stuck, about the goddamn angels that are supposed to appear when you die. So much for that.

What am I gonna do now boss? No one's taking my order for break. So who's got my cigarette? I need to scrub a butt.

* * *

When you can't act in the material world, most of it loses its appeal. Frankly, I'm bored by the way they are all living their lives. Not like I can tell them about it. Just saying. It

all makes me bitchy as shit. I haven't eaten solid food since I swallowed half my tongue. There's just one thing you can't get rid of at death, and it's the one thing I would've given away—hunger. It just follows after you.

I wander the city looking for scraps, watching the clouds around everyone's head, the material side of their moods. It wafts around me like the second-hand leftover smoke from all the cigarettes I used to enjoy. It's all that's left. Their moods are not that great. Most of them taste rancid. But that's my world. When your stomach is empty, there is only desperation—you suck down everything you can, all those threads of color directed out at the world. Their happy thoughts, though, are tough to get a taste of. They're all trying to steal 'em from each other too, breathing them in before I have a chance—that is, if they even share 'em. Most of the happy thoughts are directed right back to themselves, which leaves me with garbage. Forgive my frustration, but this world is by and large a shitty place to eat. I'd come up with some inspiring thoughts to feed myself, but my happy-thought factory is closed. Those doors were shut when I woke up welded to a new pipe mouth. Positivity begins with a feeling of fullness, but there ain't none of that for me here. This is a scavenger's world now.

It's not fair, when you think about it, because I often had these fantastic ideas when I had a body. Those really tasty ideas. Not like when I was young, and I was going to build a ski resort in our suburban backyard. Not a stupid fucking idea that you *think* is a really great fucking idea—my fantastic ideas were truly fantastic. I'd know because I'd get this tingling sensation in my head and I just knew: Leo, if you act on this idea, it will really be something. But then I'd be next at the deli counter. "Yeah, the *ush*, Tony," I'd say. Only to change my mind as I do, "Naw, you know what. Pastrami. Put some pastrami on that. And rye. Yeah. Enough with the chicken parm," and that would be it for my thought. Just like that I'm back to an ordinary blue-collar guy on my lunch break. My

truly fantastic idea was gone. I know it'd be a better story if I could tell you what my fantastic ideas were. But that's the whole thing. I can't remember them here. Maybe some vulture like me has been making a meal out of *my* happy thoughts. Either way, here I am, on the other side of things, starving. Come on people. Payback time. Think up something tasty for a change, will you? I'm waiting.

At the end of the day, the choices are few. I've got to sit down to eat with those I know—relatives, a few old friends—that's where the best food is. I always knew a good dish. I might have been a chef if I stuck around, and if I didn't blow all that money on a couple years of art school. At first, art classes were just the best way to keep up the grades while I played lacrosse, but I was alright at it from day one. Turns out I'd been building sculpture on the job for six years—all those walkways and walls. Those rich snobs didn't know how to get their hands dirty. Took 'em years to catch up.

When my name appeared in the papers for the wrong reasons, I couldn't walk to class without some dude yelling out loud about how he knows a girl who knows a girl who says I—you know, yelling about my problems like he knows me, like they were all just waiting for the moment to kick me when I was down. Anyway, that's the kind of shit I don't need here. So I find someone I know around dinner time who's a little more positive.

Here's how it works: when they eat, I prod them with a little image of something nice I did for them. It's just a little screen that opens in their mind, just like any thought of their own, and they always think it's a thought of their own—I'm not the *only* narcissist around. Then I step back and see what they make out of it. Sometimes they take the good memory of me and immediately overlay it with a time I lied to them, sometime I stole. Their thoughts turn out nasty and pus laden and spoil dinner for both of us.

But sometimes, if I do it right, they cooperate, and there's some cream to be had. Friends and family can be alright about remembering the positive stuff, and when they slip off in their laments about the good times with their old boy Leo, that's when I can skim a little bit of the mascarpone frosting, the Chantilly cream if you will, the meringue, off the top of their memories. I'm exaggerating the pleasure, but suffice it to say, it's a world better than eating the random stuff on the street. But when I do it right with friends and family, those little energetic fluffy vapor parts float to the top—those bubbly thoughts about yesterday's pleasures. They sooth the gurgles in my stomach with a wave of energy that travels down from my head. Each one is a little different, but they do take the edge off the pain. That feeling of the empty hole running down through my center though, that sticks around.

"What was I just thinking?" they wonder. Don't worry honey, it's gone.

* * *

My cousin Ronny eats at the Blue Lotus Chinese Restaurant at 5:30 p.m. every Monday and Thursday. So that's one regular spot. He's losing his hair quickly now and starting to put on a few pounds. He's not going to date a woman like the one that just dumped him. Ever again. I know what she looks like, ok. The picture keeps popping up in his mind. She's a Wall Street bride, not the suburban housewife this guy was after. The problem isn't his looks though, but his attitude. Take what you can get, buddy. Otherwise you're a dead duck at a Chinese restaurant leaving me just your fat to skim. I appreciate you, it's nice that you share a little with your boy. Let's face it though, you're starting to like my company a little *too* much. Elbows on the table, stirring that wonton soup and you start conjuring memories of the good times. Remember when we were the kings of this town? You do. I could always get you up for a night out.

The waiters pour his tea and look at him with pity. Come on. Don't take their fucking pity. He gives them his sorry-ass smile. They know what he likes to drink and what he likes to eat. His waiter lets him say it, but he's writing it down before the words are out of Ronny's mouth: Long Island duck. They don't know where she is, but they're wondering. So they're careful not to smile too wide at him like usual. That would be inappropriate.

Let's face it, Ronny. Going to dinner alone doesn't feel the same for you. You look like a different person, man. You *are* a different person when you don't have your girl to feed on. I guess we've got something in common—both of us born hungry into a new world.

Obsessing about other people wasn't my drug. Personally, when I had some material swinging between my legs that fit in between other people's legs, I wasn't overly concerned about what we did after we disconnected. "Do whatever you want," I'd tell them. And conversely I had women anytime I wanted. So what's the problem? I've always been sensitive to other people's needs. But I realized a man has to take what he can get and quit complaining about the rest. Not Ronny.

Ok, best story of the day that this guy is chewing on—get this:

He bumps into his ex at a softball game. She sits right behind him pretending to be texting as she takes his picture with her phone. Why she did this, I can't tell you. I suspect she wanted to document his thrilled expression. Maybe show it to Mr. Wall Street before they fuck. Chicks do that shit. Believe me. I was that other guy. It's like the natives were afraid: click—and they steal your soul. Ronny's frozen in his stupor for all eternity. But it's not the camera that holds him there, mind you, it's the desire to put your happiness in the hands of another. The sorry bastard didn't even say a word. He just put the experience in the reel above his head for us to share between the final slurps of

wonton soup and the Long Island duck. It tasted kind of ugly—something fermented with too much salt, fills you out to the pores with self-loathing and regret.

After the meal, he eats the fortune cookie only if he likes his fortune. He hates those stale yellow things, but he thinks if he doesn't eat it, his fortune won't come true. Today's cookie says: *Luck is the residue of design*. He eats it. You idiot, Ronny. That's not a fortune. I'll never understand why some fortune cookies can't just have fortunes in them. Call them, "Sayings of the Buddha Cookies." Yeah, yeah, yeah, the Buddha didn't say any of that stuff they say he did—I took that class—but still, that one sounds alright. As long as it's implying that *we* are the designer—well said. Name some cookies after the man. But nobody listens to my truly fantastic ideas anyway.

I head back into Port even though I have the feeling that the past might catch up with me. I been feeling hunted all day. If there are other addicts floating around here, they might think I owe them something. I probably do. I expect they're gonna wait until I'm alone, so I'll head up by the tracks, where I can find a few homeless schizophrenics to feed off of. Not the best stuff, but it's something. When I need a butt, they'll scrub one for me. Cigarettes and I always been that way. So here I am. Who wants to be my angel? I need a break from the cous. Think I've had all the soybean-fried duck fat I can handle.

* * *

The worst part of the situation is that I see clearly what I shoulda done.

When you have nothing to lose, putting a little effort into making Mom happy ain't that big a deal. But this whole dying thing puts the kibosh on that. Maybe I can encourage a random stumble across something I made her as a kid—but even that can backfire. If I get a smile though, that's a meal for me. Not now though. If I'm not careful, I'll live off her remaining happy thoughts until she's as beaten as I am. That's how sick I am. But that won't serve either one of us. I'll save it as a last resort. And for snacks.

I walk to the crest of the big hill before the harbor but settle a good twenty-thirty blocks from the ferry where the pubs first start. By the tracks. I make a cozy spot on the bench next to the run-down uptown shopping district and back in front of McBride's Station. Place gives me the creeps, but some of the guys from high school still show some nights. It's also it's a good spot for the trains. But it's getting toward morning now and the schizophrenics aren't here yet.

I nestle into the bench and let the tracks do their thing and the time goes by. The rhythm of the wheels passing over the ties distracts me from my hunger, blasts out each thought in the screech of the brakes or the blaring of the horn. I'm not gonna say it washes over you like the sound of ocean waves, it ain't like that. What I mean is it splits your skull. In my case, when it gets late at night, I don't want to think two connected thoughts. Hunger for an isolated second ain't nearly as bad. It's when there're no trains and all that time runs together with all the hunger that I get into trouble. That's when the pain gathers together, gangs up on you, grabs and rips at your guts all at once. I make it just until the coffee and bagel store opens before the voices squeeze through in their anger:

"You stole my shit—"

"—crashed my car—"

"—pawned my—from my dad."

"—broke my jaw and—"

"—you fucker. I said n—"

"Leo"—the final voice comes through deep and resonant. I'm between trains and it's silent. I turn over and see Russo in the doorway of McBride's.

"You sold us the bad smack," he says sliding down to the ground against the doorway. "And you knew." He runs his hand through his greasy black hair. "You even

took the rest of my cash when I passed out. I got to get back to the city. I've been waiting on the train that I can get on for free, and it looks like I'm gonna be waiting a long time."

"How much dough you got in your pocket bro?" I ask. Dude was never strong at math.

"Nothing, dick head, 'cause you stole it." He stands up, listening as the next train approaches and moves toward the station.

Just in time. I press my face into the grooves in the bench and shake. I put my mind under those wheels, the grinding on, the release of air. But now I hear them whispering, under the ground, the earth trembling like an earthquake. I got nowhere else to go. My guts twist in a sharp pain until I can't take it and I rock onto on my feet, but can't stand up straight. I shout toward anyone lookin' to collect: "I got nothing left for you to take!"

There's no one to answer because the Port sidewalk is empty beside Russo, and he's got nothing left to say, now that he made me feel bad, like he always did. I check over my shoulder, then stumble over to him, but there's nothing but empty brick where he had been sitting. In the deli across the street, in bagel store too, people are standing inside the store, but they're all frozen statues.

I stopped the world. I can have whatever I want, I'm thinking, as the owner Louie walks into the bar from a back room. Louie and I will split the spoils. We'll be kings. Louie points a remote at the TV near the window and it blinks on, breaking my fantasy. I stumble against the front glass window as the breaking news tracks the tower as it falls. The floor by floor impact shutters through my bones, like my spine is collapsing. Jesus, this is some way to start my day.

My neck is scratched and my chain is ripped from my neck. I turn to grab the fucker, but he is already falling. It's one of the junkies gripping my chain and stumbling

backwards as the street crumbles behind him, sucking part of the sidewalk brick from under my feet. I find footing on some newly exposed rebar for just a moment until I slip off and tumble after him. The junkie looks back at me as we fall into the earth. The chain is in his right hand, and he uses the other to flip me off. But I don't care about catching up with him—my mind clears in the freedom of falling, and a positive thought appears in my mind. I'm thinking about Russo on that last train that just rolled out of Port, and what I ran up to tell him. On his last night I came back to the apartment to push some train fare into his pocket while he was nodding out. I hope it got him outta here. I'm sorry I didn't check your breath, bro. I've been a thief, and a liar too, but I never knew that batch was bad.

Vanessa: Deprived of Water, Burned

I'm back on the red loveseat. My calves are tight like I ran but didn't stretch afterward. I reach down to massage them and my fingers slip into a heavy and slippery mulch, a foot deep, surrounding my ankles. It extends to walls of the black room, the threads seemingly growing from it. I grab a handful and hold it up to my eyes, rubbing it in between my fingers. The substance cascades in lines of interlocked letters, melding back into the earth at my ankles as it falls.

Didn't the guide say there was more information available? I wasn't sure if I had thought it or read it first, because there again is the last line of letters falling from my palm: *For further information, see "seeds: deprived of water, burned."*

Does this mean I am a guide? Or that I am *in* a guide? Because I was just hoping for a better life than the last one. Shouldn't someone be looking for me, helping me out? I mean, I just fell one-hundred seven floors, but yeah, I guess I feel ok, thanks for asking. There is a red knot at the kerning of the last letter and it sears my fingers. I let it drop and

I pull my knees to my chest on the red loveseat, extricating myself from the earth as the threads in front of me also turn to red. My day is not improving.

I put my hands in my lap and close my eyes. I breathe. But when I open my eyes again the threaded wall in front of me becomes the pixels of a screen. There is a deep darkness to the room on the other side of the screen, and the very contact of my room to it raises the temperature immediately. Steam rises from the letter mulch. The room before me becomes a firebox—jets of flame shoot from the right side of the room, striking the wall of the left side. From the ceiling, flames shoot down and strike the floor. In between the walls, I can see human shapes on fire, their skin bubbling and then charring, and they scream like baffled animals turning this way and that and bumping into one another, but there is no escape from the flames that fill the room. It looks and sounds like any horror film about hell but the unbearable smell makes it real—barbequed wet dog. I loosen my tie and pull my blouse up to my nose, but I can still smell them, and I can still hear them.

Finally, a door opens on the far wall to my left. Run, I tell them run. This is about to end, I tell myself, and then I'll find someplace better to go. The shapes run toward the open door, falling over each other, their flesh peeling off on contact. Just as the first being reaches for the door, it slams shut, and the charred people burn down to glowing skeletons on the floor. I look away from the scene, but catch movement in my peripheral vision and I can't stop myself from turning back to the scene. I don't know why. There is something wrong with me, maybe, but I need to know how it ends.

The figures stagger to their feet. They have raw pink flesh again. They scan the room, but there is no exit. Flames fill the room again. I can see my reflection in shades of red on the screen. The figures run toward a new door that has opened on the other side. I recognize him in the movement of his massive form—his uneven gait, tight shoulders,

the slight extension of his neck forward. “Leo,” I sigh. I crawl back into the nook of the red loveseat and take a deep breath to prepare myself.

Behind the scene, in another layer, words from the guide are curling back into view. It is titled, “A Warning.” It’s a little late to give me the heads up, don’t you think? I’m straining past the words and the flames—to find him again. I ignore the words scrolling on the screen from the guide. I have all the information I need, thank you. I know *exactly* what I am doing in the station and exactly *who* I have been waiting for. *He deserves wherever you decide to bring him*, a voice says in my head. It sounds like me, but it is fiercer, the logic more reckless. Then it hits me—there’s no one watching the scene but me. I’m the only one here to guide him out. *He’s lucky to get out at all*, the voice like mine says. Either way, I’ve been waiting a long time for our little chat. *You owe him a chat*.

I will be patient. I will wait for you at the top of the stairs on the platform. I find it ironic that I see your next opening so clearly, while you languish and burn between false escapes. There is a discontinuity in the wall that you cannot yet perceive. Not until the right eyes are born into your skull will you find it. How many sets will be burned out of your sockets, I can’t say—all I know is when you see that opening, you will walk through it and on up the stairs to the platform. From there I will be calling to you. Together we will find a different track. Who would ever have thought I would be your angel. Maybe my new world is not the worst case scenario after all. The fire is regrettable, really, but I guess it’s true what they say, Leo: you reap what you sow.

The Guild: A Warning

Before aiding other beings, would-be deva guides must first develop a firm grasp of the type of flavors they habitually fall for. Your perceptions on the

screen, however, are tuned only to the actions of other people. The screen might be more fruitfully viewed as the study of your own karmic holes.

These revelations are generally an unpleasant experience that you may not even be equipped to deal with yet. Heed our warning: you are not as perfect as you think.

The flavors of these experiences can be disorienting as they tend to both 1) have a stronger remnant of allure than you realize and 2) have been forgotten for a long time (i.e. “buried”). It is recommended, perhaps necessary, that you work with a member of The Guild during this module. Otherwise, you may very well get stuck, and we are all so very busy. It would be inconvenient to have to go find you ourselves. We do the best we can, but those stories about us losing track of beings? Well, they’re true.

If you extricate yourself from the world of becoming, we will record and store the experience under joint ownership with The Guild in the volumes of kāvya—divided into the various tastes. Please note, however, that this transference of media does not cut the allure of your own misdeeds and tragedies that have (no doubt) befallen you repeatedly in the past. The flavor of being wronged is not so easily put aside and we cannot stop you from dredging up the story. Continued enjoyment does occur with each re-visitation of the kāvya.

*For this reason, we suggest you first visit **Module 62: Nibbidā: Developing Distaste for the Variety of Worlds**. But you won’t—at least, probably not at first suggestion. As much as this refusal to visit **Module***

62 depresses us, it really is your choice. From experience, we realize that we can't go up and down with your follies. We have our own work to do. For now, we suggest you comprehend why such perceptions appeal to you, and that you carefully consider in advance if they are worth the trip. The danger of habitually falling for them is that such worlds become more and more difficult to get out of. As we said, we would really like to do more, but we are so very busy. Good luck. In other words, we hope you make good choices.

Leo: The Narrow Corridor

I hit the turnstile and catch the words “account balance” on the little green screen. The numbers race upward into the thousands, ten-thousands. I don't stay to find out how high it goes. That's good right? Gotta be good. But somehow I know it's not. Why would it be good?

I race toward the stairs 'cause I'll be kicking myself if I just miss the train, and some guy in a white lab coat and blue scrubs walks up to me. I think physician assistant, but doctors don't tend to get in your face down here.

“This is a ‘can't miss’ man!” He's pointing to a diagram of a gleaming high-rise on the subway wall. “Don't miss out on this opportunity. There is a world in every window! It's all gimmicks down there. *This* is the real deal.”

I shake my head. He must be some nutter. I gotta keep moving, but ok yeah, maybe for about a half a second I almost thought about investing. Even in my desperation I can tell when I'm being set-up.

“Did you hear me?” the man calls after me. “Get in on the ground floor right here! What are you going to do with all that credit down there? All that business down there is

old money. Establishment. You think you're going to get any share in that? Forget it. I'm offering you the up and comer!"

I look back as I descend down the escalator and can see only his legs, and his hands at his sides gesturing, and then the ceiling cuts him off entirely from view. At the bottom, the hallway splits into two—each half as narrow—with bright and colorful stores on either side growing in size.

I walk past an expensive watch store and a duty-free liquor store. The salesmen and women smile at me from every store. I smile back at one fine looking and familiar chick, and that's when it hits me. I used to know all these people. Were they shop keepers in Port? Or did I just bump into them at McBride's? That was it. Maybe I should have stayed with the PA on top of the escalator. They're all addicts down here. You can't believe a word they tell you. They'll tell you anything to get your cash, to get your drugs, to get the address of your hook-up so they can rip him off too. The bill is never worth what they're selling. I know a trap when I see one.

The hallway ends, and there's a guy in a gray suit and purple tie. Users don't dress like this. He says, "Geothermal energy."

As I get closer, I can see he's the same guy I saw cooking Scalper just before I died, but I'm not excited to see him this time. In fact, I feel drained and my palms go kinda cold and clammy.

"That is our future," the man continues. He reaches into his breast pocket and pulls out a folded sheet of paper. Users also don't print nice brochures.

He points toward some diagrams framed on the wall in a glass display: "Seismic activity will only keep increasing, diverting the control of resources—and the pleasurable life—directly to you. We are an old company with sufficient backing, but there is room for a few committed entrepreneurs like yourself. People with vision. People capable of

making their own decisions. In fact, those are the ones we prefer, people that *insist* on making their *own* decisions. Those not afraid to grab all they can are the only ones really living.”

It sounds good. I sound like their guy. But why would I be their guy?

“Let’s cut to the chase,” he says. “We are in the business of taking over and managing any of the lucrative niches left. There are endless opportunities. Whole realms of opportunity have been overlooked. Help us with our management, and you will rise to power too. Or invest elsewhere and we will burn you alive.” His smile seems genuine, if not for those conniving eyes.

“Did you just threaten me?” I ask. Nobody talks to me like that.

He smiles. “Sir, you look angry,” he says in a soothing voice. He steps backward into the corner, like a poised matador as I step toward him. He opens a palm as if he is showing me the way around him. “Violence is not the answer,” he says, and then sings under his breath, “Except when we don’t get what we want.”

I swing for his head, but he is expecting this and ducks. My momentum pushes me through a door I hadn’t seen. As I fall through, I grab hold the doorknob and cling to it as I hang there, suddenly without a floor below my feet. “You set me up,” I spit up at him, but my weight is too much and my hands are already losing their grip.

“Just a matter of time,” he says. “You’re going to fall for one of us. This is *your* company, sir. This is what *you* taught us to do. We’re living without regrets, because ‘only the weak pay attention to consequences.’ Isn’t that what you taught us? Sir? Sir?” And he turns and walks away as my hands slip from the door, crashing onto the floor of a dark room. I hear a steel door above me slam shut. The dark room smells like festered leather burning in a vat of rancid pork fat. I never had a company. I had a disease. I never trained these monsters. If I acted in line with them, is it my fault?

“Is it our fault?” a man’s voice whines somewhere near to me in the darkness. “Is it our fault that we are acting in line with you?”

The temperature in the room rises as dots of dim red light appear on all six walls. It’s like some kind of downtown club, but it’s too hot, and I can tell from the silhouettes that they’re no chicks. Sweat beads on my forehead. As the red lights grow, a dozen naked guys are all standing to the right of me, scanning the room nervously. I look down at my t-shirt and jeans. Not sure why I’m the only one in clothes. I must be their leader.

Their skin is pink. There are no exits. The walls are thick steel plates held together with a thick weld that musta been made by a torch bigger than any I’ve ever held. There are holes that could only be made with a quarter-sized drill bit—from a machine more powerful than any you can buy. The holes are evenly spaced, four inches apart along the surface of each of the four walls, roof, and floor. It’s solid work.

I investigate the bore—smooth and straight down to a red light or a flame—when the man in the tux walks over to me and straddles the hole, his face below mine, obstructing my view. He puts his hands on his knees and speaks in mock surprise: “What could it be?” he asks.

There is a ticking and the light ding of a mechanical kitchen timer, and then a sound like jet engines roaring all around us. A fountain of blue and red flame shoots out of every hole in the room. The man’s face is sprayed with fire. The flames come from all directions, spurting from all six walls, striking down and up and across the room, knocking us all off our feet. The flames that don’t strike our bodies strike the wall across. I jump up and duck and scream, my entire body cooking and burning. There is no place to go.

I flail wildly as flame after flame strikes me. The man in the burnt tux looks up at me, the hair gone on his head, but he is less affected than the others. He smiles at me as

his face burns; melting, it drips to the floor like Velveeta, and his smile broadens—white teeth all exposed, the black sinew stretching from ear to ear. We scream together as our muscle chars.

Finally, a stainless steel door opens on one side of the room and we run for it as we are knocked left and right by the flames. The bones on the soles of my feet clank against the metal floor. The door is to the back kitchen of McBride's. My home. But just as we reach it, the door slams shut and we collapse against the wall, and fall to the floor entwined in a pile of our burnt matchstick bodies. A click sounds and the flames recede and then disappear. We shake and shutter as our bodies move toward death.

But we don't die. The bits of flesh remaining along our bones cool and harden into a putty that grows, covering our skeletons. There are screams, some low cries, and the worst part—the sobbing—until the growth of nerve paralyzes us with pain. We twitch and jerk, and then lay still again to catch our breath in our remade flesh. We are so raw that I can feel air cast from any breath, anywhere in the room, brush across my new skin.

"Stop breathing!" I yell, but the scream cuts my flesh like razors. We crawl and then wobble back onto our feet, eyes scanning the room.

The holes around the room again glow with a dim red. I look skyward and consider saying a prayer. Who's gonna help me? As the room heats, the red dots overhead swirl into a recognizable form, and I see your face. I lay back on the floor, arms and legs spread as if star gazing, in order to see you better. The arc of your nose—just slightly too long, giving you a sharpness to augment the angles of your cheeks. Vanessa. Did I tell you how it fits your face perfectly? Did I draw you once in college?

Again, there is a ticking and the light ding of a mechanical kitchen timer, and then again a sound like jet engines roaring all around us. The others run to the far side, but I crawl into this tender feeling, and I broil on the floor in the flames licking out of her

image—the fires cutting even more deeply through my mind than they do my flesh. I see us in room after room together, like running through a train—the memories burnt out of me as fast as they appear.

“Let me show you the next door,” she says. “Did you love me? Is that how this started? Let me help you explain,” and I burn and scream, and I beg her to please, please put the past away.

“Leave the past where it is,” I cry. My body shudders. “And never let it out!”

There is a path free of flame to the nearest wall. There is a wooden dorm room door. Someone painted a giant black tulip on its surface—was it you, Vanessa? The door opens.

Leo: The First Meeting

I first sat beside her on one of those green benches out on The Island. Was that it, by the bike path? We were across the Sound, but neither of us said a word. It was during a night out in Port maybe? Was I still in college then? Yes. It was the meeting before a trip, but we never took the trip. We had something in common. Something about work. Or was it a class? We were in a college class together. But *this* meeting is happening in Penn Station. She called me and then I saw the door.

I crawl up a staircase from a two-hour train delay, a hellish delay, underground. The hot stuffy air. People sweating like pigs, worried we might die down there, or did it get so bad we were hoping we would? Sometimes you have to black out what happened underground and just move forward.

She meets me at the top of the stairs, her curves sublime in a form fitting dress. She stands only as high as my chest, but she hands me a suitcase—*my* suitcase—and pushes me toward the bathroom.

“Change,” she says.

I unzipper the suitcase in a stall and find dress clothes neatly folded. I put them on and then stuff the blackened remnants of my sneakers and cooked watch into my suitcase. There are things I might remember about these items, but I won't. I emerge without a word, escalators leading out the street, but somehow I know, we have another train to catch down here. How did she have my suitcase?

“I'm starting to remember this place,” she explains as if reading my mind, “the baggage is already in the room before you arrive.” She leads me past the big screen toward our departure. “It might wear on me after a time, if there are more of you to help. Why do people think they can do whatever they want, hurt whoever is in their way, and then turn to those same people to bail them out?”

“Listen, I'm not looking for a loan, or a handout. And just in case, if you are doing some kind of foreclosures, I don't even own real estate. Why does everyone down here sell real estate?”

“I don't sell real estate,” she says. “I hop lines.”

“Perfect.” I am thinking only about lunch, about how we might find some food and I can pull myself together. Or a cigarette.

She scoffs. We're passing a collection of fast food joints, sharing a room under a low ceiling, and there's Nathan's. What I would do for a chili dog, crinkle-cut fries, all washed down with a lemonade. I pause and watch three teenagers with a ukulele diving into their meal. It's the same group of gawkers that rode up to McBride's on skateboards. But how do I know them?

“Hey!” I say. “Throw me something. Anything. I'm starving over here,” but my voice doesn't travel down here, or I'm too winded to project. They don't even look up and she is fifteen feet ahead of me now. I stumble as I turn and try to keep up with her. I

have no money, and I need a ticket to get out of here too. I keep looking behind me, at that green sign: *Nathan's*. But I can't get on the wrong train, another metal box stuffed with pig-people. I shudder, remembering my burnt clothes, but I don't let my mind fully remember.

"I suspect most people around here have already lost their houses," she finally says as I catch up to her. She leads me toward the west tracks. "Here, it's more of the mental space we have left. You push a pendulum one way and it comes back. Sometimes that pendulum looks like me." She directs us down a side passageway, a yellow-bricked tunnel. "It pushes back . . ." she clarifies, "but that's not my fault. When people pretend to care, all they get back is pretend care."

"So you help them get out of the way of the pendulum?" It's cooler on this side of the station, and the ceilings are a little higher and less claustrophobic.

"Well, not when you're strapped to it," she says.

"This is gonna be bad, huh."

"Were you bad?"

"Probably," I say.

The restaurant signs are not familiar, but the food smells better—slow roasted pork and sweet barbeque sauce. It must be expensive. I should ask her to lunch and then I could say I misplaced my wallet.

"So you're like a psychotherapist?"

"Different. You might not even know that you have some bad debt. We're like the Mafia. We keep our manners while we're getting to know you. But now that I know you . . ." her voice trails off. "Follow me," she says pointing us down an escalator, twice as long as any I have ever been on.

“How well you know me?” I say. “Did I get you involved in this?” We were past the restaurants now. “I’m kinda hungry,” I try.

“It’s not like I answered an ad or I’m getting a wage—I guess it’s just about me reconnecting with those I used to know. Or collecting. What is most shocking, Leo, is that you don’t even remember me. .”

“Refresh my memory,” I say.

“Yeah,” she says, “We’ll get to that. But it’d be better if you remembered me.”

I stop walking. “I do. Kinda,” I call after her.

“Let’s move, big guy,” she turns around and shoots me a cool glare, “you’re not going any further than I take you. We’ve got time to recollect, but if we miss this train we ride the local.”

Her words click with the rhythm of her boots on concrete as she walks backwards and then turns back around. Calf-high and leather. I follow her as she strides on in her dress.

“This is what you like me in, right?” she asks, not looking back, and I realize she knows I’m watching her move.

I smile. Yes. I fall in behind her steps. I will say only what will keep us moving together, that will get me on that train and dinner.

“I can be what you want me to be, but I can’t make people face what they did,” her palm turns upward and her fingertips sweep down the contours of her shape. “This is just for you. You’re welcome. You didn’t even have to ask.”

“Thank you. Lead the way.” This bitch is nuts.

She laughs, throws her head back. “Don’t worry. I will.”

She stops in front of the Metro South Maglev entrance, the ceilings several stories high now, the brick changing to burgundy. “Let me see your ticket.”

I hand it to her as we walk toward the board of departures.

“Yup,” she says, holding onto the pass, “still time to get on, but it’s about to leave.”

“Are you coming too?”

“I’m picking up a client.”

“Serious case?”

“Honey, we are all such *serious* cases.”

“Can we head back for lunch first?” I reach for my back pocket and pat my slacks. Still no wallet.

“It’s all included,” she says, “But you’ve got to be patient with the food. We need to board. Now.”

“Oh,” I finally get it, “we’re getting on the same train.” I’m watching her heels up to the hip, following her down a staircase to our track.

“You’re transferring,” she says pulling a weathered scroll out of her purse. “I’m auxiliary. I just happen to be here.”

“You work for a museum?” I ask.

“Mapping narratives,” she says. “I don’t really know what I’m doing yet.”

“Trying to make it in Hollywood?”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“There should be less of those false storybook endings. Like hey, what happened to Cinderella’s love life after the third kid, right?”

“Funny,” she deadpans. “Grab my arm.”

Everything is suddenly familiar. Like we’d been planning this for years. She always had a thing for me, that much I remember.

“Underground travel,” she says, pretending to shiver. “At least we’ll get fed.” She pulls me toward the far entrance. “Or, I’ll do my best at least.”

Fed. Just the word makes me relax. I sneak a look behind her—her legs, the circle of skin exposed on the small of her back. She presents her cheek, and as I lean down to kiss it she grabs my chin and points it toward the tickets in her hand.

“Did you even look at your destination?” she asks.

There is this funny print that I can’t read on the ticket. “What’s it say?” I ask.

“Down,” she said.

“South?”

“Down,” she repeats and laughs.

“Like to China?” I don’t get it.

“Let’s say China. Let’s enjoy the trip. I’m tired of hating you.”

“Hating me?”

“Oh,” she says, “and there’s some new technology you might not know about—I travel fast. Do you remember my name yet?” We move through the turnstile.

“I never forget a face.”

She is Asian. Chinese. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, and then Thai—all in rapid succession. People who can’t tell Asians apart aren’t reviewing past lives. Then she is a man. He’s Russian, from the Eastern Bloc, growing all the shades of hair of the Europeans, Africans, South Americans, and finally North Americans when she turns back to female and smiles.

“Find something you like?” she asks.

“I remember you,” I realize. “We’ve done this before?”

“Something like this,” she says. “You take me. I take you.”

“We had split the price for this trap?” I ask, “I mean trip?” The puzzle clarifies but not fully drifting together.

We’re at the turnstile.

“You earned this one,” she says handing me the ticket. “Show the screen the piece of paper.”

I do as she says, laying it flat on the screen lit red. “Do you have one?” I look back to her.

She walks right through—the gears turning and there’s a clack—clack, like the whole world is shifting around us. We’re through.

“Metro South and I have an arrangement now,” she says. “I guess I’m on my way up in the world. But first things first.”

Right. Drop the riff raff off. Don’t worry, honey. I’ve gotten through worse without your help. I was never attached to getting up above these tracks anyway. It’s like that all-inclusive spring break trip the guys took in college to Cancun. Half of us failed out after that—and we probably knew it getting on the plane. Wasn’t she going to come on the trip?

“Will there be dinner?” I ask. We slide through the doors and into the sleek contours of the Maglev. It is like old times, but elevated and with improved technology. Like there is no time between then and now. I’ll pay any hidden costs for this trip, for just a day and a night away from the tracks and rooms I came from. I’ll take a little residue of luck any way we can design it.

We walk through the cars, looking for our room. “I can’t wait to eat,” I say, bringing my hand to my mouth out of reflex to remove my cigarette.

“Yes,” she says as hydraulic doors open into our cabin. “I imagine it’s been a while. You can eat on the way.”

Of course there's no cigarette coming out of my mouth, just a small hole and a tube of glass laced down into a throbbing empty stomach. Hard to remember how this all happened. "A crushed red velvet seat?" My voice echoes in the cabin like it did all the way through the passageways on the way here. Your problems just follow you down here.

"In every room," she replies.

"What?"

"The seat's in every room." She looks out the window like she didn't need to look around to know it because we'd been here before.

Vanessa: Night Train

"Crushed velvet seats?" he asks. His mouth melted around a pipe, does nothing to minimize his heavy Long Island accent—that already heavy tongue is further pressed down, and the sound vibrates as he pushes words past his lips. It's annoying.

The glass doors seal behind us with a hydraulic hiss, and we're alone in the train cabin.

"Yesss." I savor the sound in my mouth. I'm in. It's one of those terrible moments that hovers on the cusp of what I've always wanted—terrible, because it only takes one kernel of doubt to spoil the belief in what I'm doing here. "And red curtains, tied with a red rope with red tassels." I let them drop from my hand.

"I don't know. Weird place. Kinda creepy."

Who's he to complain, after what I just brought him out of? "Well, I don't slum it when I travel," I say. "Just enjoy it." I reach around his waist in the small space and my breath stops. I place the map on the seat by the window and step back as fast as I can from him. "And no need to make a lot of conversation down here."

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“Can you get me a drink or something?” What I really need is to eat, but just the sight of him is enough to make me vomit anything solid I’d put in my stomach. “You can put down the bags.” I open the storage compartment under the loft bed. Am I going to have to tell him everything?

“They got a dining car on this thing?” He slides the last bag onto the floor with a thud. His voice is like the clarinet I played in high school. Such an awful instrument.

“It has everything you could want,” I say, smiling. “I always feel like I’m in between lives on trains. Like I can be anyone.” This would be so much easier if he remembered me.

“Kinda like how I feel like I’m dying because you’ve dressed me for a funeral,” he says with that shit-eating grin, looking down at his black wrinkle free slacks, and gray fitted and collared shirt.

I wag a finger. “No need to comment on everything. Remember the deal?”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I get it. My job is to be appreciative for the transfer of stations. And to remain presentable. Am I not still presentable?”

“Very handsome,” I say immediately regretting it. “I’m really parched.”

“Can I charge drinks to the room?” he asks, stepping toward the door.

“Yes, but don’t try to sneak any food. We have to eat together.”

“That’s a weird rule,” the sound at his lips reverberates, a cross between a buzz and a whistle.

“Patience please. Try to enjoy the trip without questioning everything.”

He groans and exits. The door closes with a puff of air. Silence.

Outside the window of our room, trees are dotting the plains like scarecrows reflecting the first dark reds of sunset. It is a perfect departure time—when we come to

the high point of the continent in four and half hours, we'll be in twilight. I can picture those craggy Colorado peaks growing around us like the very teeth of night opening its mouth. It's so beautiful—to finally take a trip, even if we can't be college kids again cutting loose.

Then we'll plunge underneath the mountains, following fault lines deep within the earth. Train-bound in darkness. To think that growing up this was the joke: dig to China. Then we did. The journey of the first Americans, in reverse—and underground.

The train—hovering above the rails—begins to accelerate as smooth as an arrow shot across the land. There's no friction, just a sudden disengagement from the earth. I sit down on the velvet loveseat facing the landscape as Leo steps back in and puts my gin and tonic down on the table between us as he sizes up the drink straw.

"Gin and tonic?" I ask.

"That's what you drink," he says. His face is gaunt and drawn as he pulls through the drink straw. "I'm thirsty too."

"I drank these in college," I say. "I just wanted some juice, or something."

"I didn't want to ask more questions. I was trying to play along. Did you graduate already?"

"I'm long done with college, Leo. Trust me."

For a moment it is as if we are the ones hovering and the earth is spinning beneath us. I cross my legs, hugged by the stretchy black dress, and take a deep breath. The feeling passes. I haven't worn something like this in years—I can't *wait* to get it off. I pick up the scroll and smile up at him. I have his full attention. My chest bubbles with glee and I hate myself for it. I let my smile morph to a glare so he knows to leave me alone.

"What'd I do?" he asks, whistling the last word.

“I need a bath,” I say, and scroll the map open across my lap, the ends rolling to either end of the loveseat. There is a type of key along the top. I press the title “The Gods Who Fall,” and start reading the text about the gods at the start of time as they become consciousness of their radiant bodies.

“Didn’t you say we got hot springs in the morning?” He leans over and unzips a suitcase behind me.

I laugh. “That might be on your itinerary. But no, I didn’t say it. Don’t get so excited. They can be too hot to enjoy even for the locals.” The sun is a pale pink now, melting into the start of the plains—“Reminds me of those buoys from back home, some kind of marker.”

He stands up to follow my eyes, to see what I’m talking about. “Lobster trap,” he says.

“No-no. Not the Styrofoam.” I look back at him over my shoulder.

“Lobster trap,” he says holding up and examining the blackened remnants of a sneaker. “What the hell is this?”

I sigh and go back to the map. There is a sub-header of “Crystalline” and there is a square symbol of interwoven lines. I press on the symbol and a crystalline spreads across the map, like the moment a pond freezes over. As it settles words appear:

we grow small teeth and fingernails. We attack the crystalline crust, tearing pieces off with our hands as we continue to gobble it down. We delight. We smile and smile, but mostly we eat, and the universe expands out another hundred million years. A hundred million years of bliss. But to us it might as well have been a few minutes.

“Do they have lobster on the menu?” Leo asks, pulling up a pair of blood-spattered Diesel jeans that he then balls up with haste and stuffs in the small trashcan. His hands

are shaking.

“Where are those pants from?” I ask, testing his memory.

He shrugs. “Been a bit of a whirlwind few days. You gave me my bag in the station, but I can’t remember packing this stuff. Do they have lobster?” he asks again.

“Lobsters are bottom feeders,” I tell him. “And your bag was already there waiting for you, just for the record.”

“And butter?”

“We can go see,” I say, “if you will shut up for like five minutes first. And close that suitcase. It smells like death in here.” I switch on the vent fan and point down to my suitcase, “If you want to change, the blue button-down shirt is in mine. I think it would be an excellent color choice for tonight. Play along, please.”

He holds my hand as we pass into the lounge car and I soften into his shoulder. We never got to this place, but sure, good boy, let’s pretend. We pass three young musicians in tight black tee-shirts swaying lazily from side to side as they finish a song. One is strumming a ukulele while another plays a harmonica. The singer strikes a tambourine.

As a breeze is pleasing to one who is sweating
 or a drink to one who thirsts,
 you, radiant one, are dear to me.
 Like medicine for the afflicted,
 like food for the hungry,
 calm me, lady,
 like water for a fire ablaze.
 Calm me, lady,
 like water for a fire ablaze.

“Where have I heard that?” I ask him.

“What?” Leo asks, engrossed in the food on the tables before us.

I look back at the three musicians as they bow to a smattering of applause and start to pack up, with one eye on some customers' food at the bar. They all look alike with their dark hair and thick eyebrows. Maybe they're brothers.

We can't find an open table, so we walk out of the lounge car and into the proper dining car. I feel eyes on me and lengthen my stride. There are older couples in this car, squinting as they chew, bent over their food, napkins at the ready. The middle-aged guy in the golf shirt looks right over his wife's shoulder and offers me a creepy smile—thanks. You can tell he has money because what else would he have to offer? Sure enough, they are talking about the stock exchange as we pass.

Leo stiffens at my side. "I don't like it here," he says.

"We'll just eat and go," I say.

"They think they're really tourists," he whispers as several of them point their cameras at the plains, or they wear their Nikons around their neck in case of surprises—as if a rhino is going to speed out of the bush. "They think they're so clever," he mumbles under his breath, "so much better than all of us that they ripped off."

I look up at Leo. "I always thought it was the power that corrupts people."

He narrows his eyes at me. "Sometimes it's the ones you can't see that you have to worry about."

The insanity of the line creeps me out, but he is already directing me in front of him to an open table like a gentleman, so I drop it. Well, well. He must feel like he's in a rap video, pimped out with a hot date. And on cue, he starts nodding his head, like you can pimp it to Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique* playing in the second dining car. Back in college, he always thought he was the hardest. Someone should have told him, listen, you're still just a white boy from the North Shore, you're never going to be any more "gansta" than Vanilla Ice was. Please. We pass another depressing older couple, planning

some kind of take over. These might as well be the people I served in the Windows of the World restaurant. Maybe they are.

“I’m not sure how we can draw her attention to what lies beneath the surface,” the silver-haired woman is saying. She’s wearing a sleek business suit with a powerful broad collar.

“Just warn the girl that we know of her underlying fabrications: her words, all her feelings and perceptions, the very way she breathes—” the woman looks right at me as I pass and move to our seats on the other side of the isle “—we see these an instant before you are even conscious of them, an instant before you create your world.”

“Ok,” I nod, and take my seat facing them, just slightly down the train car. I look at Leo. “Are they talking to me?” I ask him.

“Naw,” he says, his voice echoing embarrassingly.

Why doesn’t he notice? Why doesn’t he do something about it? It can’t be easy to breathe through either. He sits down across from me with his back to the couple across the aisle.

“We point her toward her ignorance of this ongoing fabrication,” the bald man says to the woman, rolling up his sleeves on his black button-down shirt. “She nods, but she doubts our every word.”

I stare at them and my hands fidget, rubbing one another. “Leo,” I say.

He is wrapping one of the plastic lobster bibs from the table around his neck, looking down. “Huh?” he says with a bit of a honk. I wait for him to look up at me.

“Take your time, dear,” the strange woman replies to the bald man. “When you are ready, imagine with us one step further. That’s right. Imagine that it might just be ok, far better even, if your mind’s activity here was cut, a sheath was dropped, the ground beneath you was removed and not replaced.” She straightens her posture and takes a deep

breath. “But you are not ready for that. Your thoughts are clouded. Or are they *their* thoughts? *Their* revenge? You don’t even know.”

I glare back over at her, but she is looking into the eyes of her husband, lovingly. Before my father died, I might walk into the room and catch him and Mom doing this. They seemed to be taking more pleasure in each other’s words with each passing day—especially when they knew they had a listener, usually me, and that listener would not understand the meaning even if they had caught every word.

“She would reconfigure any number of horrible worlds simply to have something to stand on,” he says to his wife. “We challenge her to go beyond death, and she in turn dives into the detritus of those who have harmed her.”

The husband looks down at his palace fish curry and slurps some up as the wife looks over at me. “You are like a cat with a flock of dead birds buried sixteen days in the back yard,” she says and looks at her husband as he rests his spoon on the bowl. She looks back at me, accusingly, “Each day you bring us an offering unearthed.”

“Really,” the husband says, dabbing at his face with a napkin, and then looks at me too, “Must this. Continue.” He goes back to eating.

“Leo!” I yell across the table. He finishes tying the ends of his bib and follows my eyes back to the table beside us.

Between spoonfuls of the curry, the couple is engaged in an in-depth conversation about the ideal balance of the flavors.

“What?” Leo asks.

“Didn’t you. . .? Oh my god.”

“What?” he asks again.

“I think it’s a Thai dish,” I say giving up.

“So?” he says.

The waitress comes over, and Leo orders lobster without looking at the menu.

“We’re over a thousand miles from the ocean.” I snap at him, but he doesn’t notice.

“All that lobster talk,” he says in his heavy muted voice and then smiles, which is just creepy, because his lips are depressed around his pin-prick hole of mouth. The smile is all in his cheeks. He turns to the waitress, “She’ll take another gin and tonic.”

I almost object to him ordering for me, then I almost object to the drink choice, but I remind myself, this is temporary. Play along. “Just the drink tonight,” I say, my pitch a little high, and beam.

“We all need one fix,” he says handing the waitress the menus. She leaves.

“Thanks for looking out for me,” I say, still smiling. “So what’s yours, Leo?” I take his finger and pretend to nibble.

“My what?” he says.

“Your fix, honey.”

“You,” he laughs. I bite down on his finger, my teeth catching on his nail as he steals back his hand. He screams and shakes his hand and then looks at the finger. The white part of the nail is ripped off down into the pink. “What the hell are you doing?” he says, rubbing his chest with his uninjured hand.

“You shouldn’t have pulled it away.” I remove the nail fragment from my mouth and flick it under the table.

He tries to suck his damaged finger, but it won’t fit into his mouth. He inspects it for blood instead. “That hurt,” he says. “That’s not normal.”

The waitress returns and sets down my drink. She sets down another napkin for him, placing first a double jaw lobster cracker, then a pair of seafood scissors, and finally a thin metal pick.

I remove my lime from my drink. I remember Leo and his friends in college, always making our drinks too strong. I remember drinking them anyway. I spray a little lime into my drink and then bring the lime toward him, smiling. “Aw, bring your finger here!”

“You’re gonna pay for that shit,” he says darkly. “Stay away from me.”

I look out the window and ready my napkin in my lap. “Is that so, Lee-o. Is that so.”

We move through fields of fracking wells and tanks at dusk. There are designs to replace some of the lost area with algae ponds, but it is going to be built closer to the Front Range.

I put my hand on his torn finger.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“When you make a mistake, you should make it right. It’s only fair.”

“Listen, I’d rather you didn’t. Ok?”

“Right.” I pat his hand as the waltz of the second movement of *Symphonie Fantastique* begins to pick up over the dining car speakers. Such a strange choice for dinner music. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I don’t know what possessed me.”

He shrugs his shoulders. “I’ve seen a lot worse,” he says looking toward his finger. He pulls his hands out from under mine and holds up both palms: “The past is in the past,” he says, “Let’s drop it.”

I lower my head and look up at him. “It’s not that easy,” I say. “Not for me.”

He laughs. “Well, I’m gonna remember only the best parts of your behavior tonight then. Anger’s not exactly opening the right doors for me around here.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nothing to be sorry about. Just how it works.”

“I’m sorry I only see the worst in you.”

Leo looks around for the waitress. “Fine,” he says. Just no more biting.”

“Promise,” I say, almost dropping it. “I will eat only what you offer.” I laugh.

“Not even one small regret for me?”

“Deal,” he says ignoring my request. “But the nail wasn’t offered.”

“That will be the exception.”

At the table beside us, the gray-haired woman is talking to the top of her husband’s balding head. He jabs a forkful of steak toward his mouth.

“Does it get any worse before it gets better?” I ask out the side of my mouth.

He tries to raise the corners of my mouth, but I wouldn’t call it a smile. He thinks I’m the one who’s crazy.

Finally, the lobster arrives and he fixes his eyes on it all the way down to the table. I wouldn’t be surprised if this will be the first thing he’s eaten in months. He turns it over and grabs the body with one hand and the tail in the other, and hot juice sprays right into his face.

I laugh and pull the plate over, feeling borderline motherly. “Here,” I say, “let me help,” and I break off the tiniest leg.

“The tail,” he says.

Poor guy hasn’t looked in the mirror. That mouth. He’s lucky to get anything in there. “Shush,” I say. “Get a single finger into your mouth and I will feed you the tail.”

He looks confused, but he is also not entirely clueless. His hand gropes around his mouth and then finally circles the contour of his shrunken lips, and the tiny hole. I expect him to freak out and start screaming, but he just gets quiet as he remembers, and accepts the design of his face. I crack the shell and pull out a piece of meat not thicker than a thin wire. I dunk it into the stainless steel ramekin of butter and lift it so a drop of it hovers

there like pure gold. I can tell by his eyes that he has, at least for the moment, forgotten that he will not be able to eat the rest of the lobster.

I pull my hand away from him, but he grabs it, crushing my wrist as he removes the piece of meat from my hand.

“Ow!” I say and he drops my hand trying to thread the buttery meat into his mouth. I rub my wrist as the piece of meat bends at his lips but doesn’t enter. “Serves you right,” I say, but he is closing his eyes now, searching for any taste of butter to move into his mouth. He swallows. He opens his eyes. He puts the sliver of meat back down on the plate. His face is long and angry and he brings his hands to rest on his belly.

I wave the waitress over and push the plate of lobster to her.

“We’ll eat later,” I say to her, still holding my wrist. Sometimes we have to wait for what we want to be freely offered. It tastes better that way.

As we head back to the cabin, the strange silver-haired woman at the other table taps Leo on the back when we pass by. We look back at her and she holds a single finger to her lips. Leo smiles and we continue back to the cabin.

“What’s that about?” I ask him. “What’s the secret?”

“I guess we’ll see,” he says. “Maybe she’ll come tell us about it later.”

“Please no,” I say.

I remember the conversation that followed about the dark side of marriage of all things. I remember telling him to sleep.

I come back to myself alone and in the darkness, stepping off our train and onto a dimly lit concrete platform in an underground station. I clutch my suitcase in one hand and hold my coat closed with the other—it’s all I’m wearing. The way my body pulses with energy, I can tell I have done something reckless. Will I never get what I want? In my

belligerence, I feel as though I can take on anything, anybody, but the hollow feeling that rises from my stomach tells me that I have already lost. I search for a place to dress, and for a place to change course. The train across the platform is pointed in the other direction—a vacetrain heading to New York. Is there always unfinished business in New York? I run up along the vacetrain in my bare feet searching for an open door. I step into an empty train car.

I sit and flip open my suitcase on my lap, and pull on blue jeans and a black blouse. Beside me, I can see the train I left across the platform. In the lounge car are those young musicians performing some kind of early-morning encore. Two of them sing, each with an arm around a woman, and a third has his head in the lap of yet another and a beer dangling in his hand. They sing this time without their instruments, in a drunken three-part harmony. The whole train car sways from side to side, singing along:

As a breeze is pleasing to one who is sweating
 or a drink to one who thirsts,
 you, radiant one, are dear to me.
 Like medicine for the afflicted,
 like food for the hungry,
 calm me, lady,
 like water for a fire ablaze.
 Calm me, lady,
 like water for a fire ablaze.

The one with slightly bigger ears tips back his drink, and the longer-haired one kisses his girl as onlookers cheer. The train continues on, as mine moves in the other direction, picking up speed.

Hours pass, and my train fills with nothing but disoriented spirits in transit—they board in station after station. I search for the first sign of light to tell me I am coming home, that we are rising up into New York City.

Leo: The Vacuum of Time

I'm up on the loft on my side, my hands around my stomach, watching the dark purple plains of dusk stream by out the window. I feel ill. Something about traveling, when that initial wave of excitement fades, I always feel like retching. She's in the seat, looking out the window at the algae ponds in the last of the light.

"Full darkness soon," she says without feeling. "Tunnel's just a few minutes away."

"Mind if I crash?" I want her to shut off the light. I'll go where the train takes me, but don't ask me to process college along the way.

"One more chapter," she says.

"What are you reading?" I ask.

"No commentary." She looks at me over her shoulder.

"Ok."

"It's one of those seedy betrayal stories."

"Where you know the worst is going to happen—"

"—but it strings you along, then it always ends up worse than you think somehow."

"Why do you read that stuff?"

"Uh-uh-ahh," it's the finger wag again. "Commentary."

"Oh yeah," I say.

"It's not like an instruction manual."

I roll onto my back, wood paneled ceiling so close I could touch it. "Those stories always make me think about Andy."

"Andy?"

“The one who was having the heart attack—”

“Oh yeah,” she remembers. “And the wife who couldn’t just drive him to the hospital.”

“Kept ‘forgetting’ things,” I add.

“Can you imagine,” she says, her voice irritated, “running back into the house while he sat languishing in the passenger seat?” She laughs looking back along the scroll.

“It’s not funny. Even if he wasn’t a good guy, I mean, he coulda died right there, never even made it to the hospital. Fifteen minutes to leave the house is sadistic.”

“He shouldn’t have put everything in her name.”

“That’s what he said. He gave her all the power as a sign of good faith. And look what she does. Typical. And afterward she wouldn’t even drive him to get his meds.”

“Oh please.” She looks at my reflection in the window. “A woman can be perfectly judicious, but when the man wants something else, look out.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say, grabbing at a sharp hunger pain in my guts.

Did I ever tell you about my aunt and her husband when they were approaching retirement? Catching her husband under the hood of her car?”

“Oh, right. ‘*Fixing* something,’” I say.

“Brake fluid does need to be changed, every time and again,” she says sarcastically, looking back at her scroll.

“Are we without breaks on this train?” I ask.

“I can’t hear you when your face is in the pillow.”

“My jaw hurts from trying to talk through this mouth,” I say running my hand over the cross hatching of the ceiling

“At least you’re not on fire.” She turns a page.

“Why did you say that?” I look back at her, but she is pretending to examine the scroll. “You’re smiling. That’s sadistic.” I fluff my pillow behind my head. “I don’t wanna talk about this stuff. My stomach’s killing me. Can you please turn out the light so I can have a moment of peace before we get to where we are going?”

She chokes out a laugh as we hit the tunnel and we immediately pick up speed. “We’re on the vactrain line, now. We’ll get there in no time. Careful what you wish for.” The train’s metal resonates around us with a high pitch hum.

“Close the blinds, at least,” I say. “These tunnels are making me claustrophobic.”

“4,000 miles per hour,” she says, but her voice sounds garbled.

I start to drift into half-dream. I remember the first time she touched my arm in college. She did it almost absentmindedly. It was a feeling that coursed through my whole body. One I could never forget—a high that I could never explain to her, that I never tried to explain. For weeks, for months, all I could think about was rekindling that sensation and keeping it alive within me forever. Whatever she had, I wanted it, but I could do nothing to hold onto it when it came back. I could only have a taste—her hip against mine, her feet in my lap. My thirst for her was so strong sometimes that I feared it would swallow me.

I try to re-imagine a point where I might have chosen differently. I was still ok during our dates; mostly, I was sober. Could she have been enough? Or would that high have faded too? Maybe we could have lived together in a house with a yard. I could have cooked for her, walked the dogs, lived a normal life. I try to imagine a sober life, but I see only tunnels in my mind. The sound of the old trains and screeching wheels, like animals screaming, pull me back from sleep.

“Did you turn up the heat?” I mumble. “Always do that . . . damn near 90.”

“Try to sleep,” she says. I catch her words sporadically, “we’re under the

mountains . . . air circulation . . . always seems so . . . long night.”

That’s a nice sound I think and again start to drift—that’s a nice sound . . . long night . . . it’s a . . . long night.

I open my eyes, searching, but I see nothing. We must be nearing the center of the planet, far under the sea. Somehow, I don’t seem to need to breathe here but the pressure is incredible. I’m back in the sealed metal box and then—flames shoot from one wall and hit the far side. My skin is melting—I wake up yelling.

My real eyes are open. I’m in a train car and the echo of my voice dies in the hum of the train. The walls and candlelight spin clockwise, stop with a jerk, start moving again, stop, begin one more time, and then stop as I sit up. Candlelight.

“Did you say something?” I ask.

“Why did you yell?” she looks up from her chair, still reading.

“I . . . I don’t know . . . sorry,” I sink back into the mattress. I’m sweating. “When did you light the candles?”

“My little ritual. Nice, aren’t they?” Her voice flows from all directions, surrounding me in a warm bath.

There’s nothing nice about the trip down. Something about the lack of oxygen, the closeness to asphyxiation. It won’t get better when this train lets me out. I roll over. The still air blankets me, presses down. I’m dizzy. “Can we find another way out?” Why am I saying this?

“We have so little time left,” she says.

Vanessa. Her name comes back to me.

She rolls up her scroll and with a click of the reading lamp all is shades of red and the inky blackness of shadow.

My eyes move over the ceiling, the uneven textures of the wood form patterns as the flickering candlelight fills the room. I cannot shake the feeling that I am paging through borrowed scenes, forgotten maybe, by everyone but me.

She climbs into bed, naked, covering her chest with the comforter, but not touching me. The heat of her body is too much. Her eyes float beside me, intent. An eerie smile.

“Trains,” I say, ignoring her. “Did we have to go underground? Did we study for the test?”

“We’re not in college anymore Leo,” she says. “I came back for you. Did you love me? Do you want to say it? Do you remember? Do you *want* to make it right? This is not right.” She places her hand on my shoulder.

I close my eyes as she bites my earlobe and drops the comforter to move her index finger above my chest. I can feel it there, circling and about to land. The heat. I throw the comforter off of me and grip the bed sheet as her wet tongue enters my ear, moving, electric—I can’t think.

“Too warm here,” I say—“wait . . . fresh air.”

“Later. Relax.” Her finger moves slowly, thoughtfully. Sweat rises up through my scalp. The touch, the finger, placed tenderly on the center point of my chest, paralyzes me, sends my mind out. I can hear the walls vibrate around us.

She turns her finger, playfully, and a dull throb builds in my chest cavity.

“I don’t deserve you,” I say. If my body is water, the pain arrives like drops of ink spreading out, turning the body into a darkness, beads of sweat pull against my flesh like weighted fishing lures. “Just tell me what to do,” I say.

She just shakes her head. “You decide, Leo. How badly do you want me?”

The tension comes out of my ribs like tentacles and moves back inside, tightening their grip. We shouldn't be here. The tide is confused. Waves at night collide at strange angles.

The finger pulls on me, draws strings from this body to hers. Her mouth is on my neck, tugging at my skin. I roll from her, trying to escape, holding the sheet like a raft, following it downstream as it drifts, downward as if the bed were an eddy—the sheets and pillows, the mattress, this very body twisting strangely, trying to fight and run from who I was.

Dizzy, I struggle back to my body. She's moving on me now just how I like—driving herself into me, and despite her small size, pressing me into the mattress, her body moving in heavy waves and jerks. It takes me out of my own mind, pumps the hunger out of me as it arises. I feel that everything now will be ok.

I'm sorry, I want to say. I fucked you up. I fucked up. But I don't speak.

She's lifting a dense cloud out of my body like some conjurer and I comply with greater intensity, writhing to the nerves in my teeth as if I were biting on an ember of rock cocaine, an ember that I suck into me. She opens her mouth and shows me her teeth for some strange effect I don't get, but I also don't care, and then she's running her tongue against her incisors, smiling at me like she loves me. Her face turns red in the candlelight, all other details lost to me.

The ember catches in my chest, and with the next jolt I think, no. Where will this all take me? I spit the pipe out into the air—I'm lighter, even free, holding on just a little longer but she is ready too—"Let me go," she demands, and says it again louder as she thrusts, and says it again louder as her shadow rises higher on the ceiling in the candlelight, and again until my body arches up, my center no longer my own, and I float in a bliss, bloating like a corpse in a marsh—"I did," I say. "I have. But you too . . . let

me go,” and as I say this, I come. I fall back through the hells, one after the next. My body burns and reforms as I tumble from one train car into another.

The Guild: Sub-Verbal and Veiled Correspondences

He feels his form go out, come back in for an instant, and then in a rush disperse into every direction, his skin-bag body deflating. The bed is a marsh. What remains of his density leaks out his pores in a clear substance, into the mattress. In the center of the bed her thighs straddle a stretch of melting skin putty. She breathes in deeply and releases a sigh suggestive of bees, her skin pulsing with new life. She slides herself to one side, and casually pulls at the shape by one of its limp latex extremities, the shriveled skin of a hand, and rolls the form off the loft. It hits the floor like a wave of water, disappearing into the narrow grate on the floor.

The crack pipe bounces and comes to rest on top of the grate—the only remnant of him left on the train. She stuffs her boots and dress into her suitcase, and Leo’s slacks into his pack of ruined clothes. She finds the note we slipped into his pocket. It’s addressed to her, so why not, she thinks. She puts on her coat, only her coat, and transfers the note into her pocket. If you had focused in the dining car, Dear, on how our words applied to your own actions, you might have avoided making such a mess. Now, all you can do is recognize the mistake and try a different approach. You don’t have to love him. It doesn’t matter if he ever loved you.

She steps out at the next stop, barefoot and onto the next train, one heading upwards toward a light at the surface. In transit now, she opens our note and reads:

Dear Vanessa,

We can't put everything in writing for you, Dear. Understand that if we spelled it out, the world would be a closed system, and a closed system would entrap you. We are not here to entrap you. We have an aversion to barriers, walls—divisions of any kind. You won't hear our assurances unpacked as words, not now, although you may have caught some of our words in a fragment of overheard conversation, and eventually you'll see a message, perhaps written on a wall the moment you remember the way we taught you to focus. It will mean more to you if you feel you have "discovered" our words. It's our way of working with those of you who still sometimes believe that the radiance of one's mind can only be confirmed through outside signs. For now, you will hear us—feel us, really—as a slight tingle in the back of your neck. Your response is a reactionary clench of your jaw and a brief catch in your breath as you surface. But you also have intuited enough of where we are trying to guide you—back to yourself.

Furthermore, we must point out your habit of staying on the tracks when arriving at the station. Walking up to "the light" *will* remain part of the rebirth procedure. We have made a note of your former requests to adjust the "annoyances" of these in between life experiences. We respect your to desire to "get on with it," and your foreknowledge that the light is ultimately an impermanent phenomena. But please keep in mind that some practices and procedures do have their uses.

Beings like yourself, who have access between realms at death, are generally annoyed by choosing a world, procedures in general, or even the simple process of keeping a light lit. We have made a note of it here, Dear. (Again.) Surely you don't stand alone on this point. For those such as yourself, who may skip reading the words we place under their very nose, The Guild will limit responses to the continuous and trite deva complaints by stating flat truisms such as:

1. I guess that is just your karma, or

2. You were the one who wanted to be born there.

Either response is appropriate to you here. If you continue to project your frustrations onto us, Dear, our sub-verbal and veiled correspondences with you will be that simple. There, we have written them into the lattice of your room. Perhaps you will find the words. Perhaps not. I guess that is just up to your karma. Please behave.

We have been covered over by your anger, annoyance, and at your worst moments, actualized revenge fantasies. You are not the only one who would prefer that directions be spelled out. We understand that the mulch of your own karma is uncomfortable, but we can only do so much. We hereby redirect you to observe the successes or failures of your own actions. (Again.) For the record, this is your karma, not ours.

So here we are together on another train ride. What will you make of this one?

She scrolls open the map and places the letter flat against it. Our words unravel into the key, where a new item appears: “The Light,” beside a symbol of a lantern. She presses the symbol and then scans the map with her finger as the old lines of The City’s subway system resurface.

Jules: Traplines

I open the trap, and I am lying in a bathtub of red lotus flowers. I slam the trap shut. I was expecting lobster or Ryan, of course. I don’t think I like the word “trap.” Besides, it’s not accurate. Lobstermen call them “pots,” and if lobster spoke, they’d call them “cages”—cages are just bars around you. Cages are just there. You just see them and you understand—it’s a cage. The concept of “trap,” on the other hand, is too much for a lobster to understand. Traps are things that people set into motion. It’s complicated. The

process happens over time. No lobster would ever call them traps. In fact, the word cage is not a great word either. There's nothing to understand about a cage. It's just got you. They're lobster pots, I'm just going to call them *pots*, and with that thought I open the next *pot* and I'm looking into a train car. It can't be, but there they are: Vanessa and Leo, their bodies are pulling and pushing against one another in a train car loft like each is a piece of stringy bait. I want to close it, and yet, I'm so shocked, I can't look away. I hold open the door, but they don't see the opening. This day is getting worse and worse.

From the bottom of the Sound I look up and down the line through the murky water to see if maybe the whole mess of traps had become a train. Nope. Still a motionless line of lobster pots resting on the sea floor, as far as I can tell.

I look back in the pot to see only lobster, like I had imagined the whole Vanessa and Leo thing. The lobster are climbing over each other pulling out little shreds of salted herring from the bait bag. They ignore the open door too. I leave the door open and keep walking through water, pulling myself forward by the traplines, through the white and green detritus until I reach the next lobster pot. The boats usually drop a dozen or so at a time, but the line can loop all over the place by the time the pots hit the bottom—especially this one, as if Uncle Louie got distracted or doubled-backed as he dropped them.

I get to the next trap, and there are just lobster in the pot this time from the start. I open the door and shake them out. They're so helpless, as they sink back to the bottom, even with their giant claws. Their legs move wildly as they drop, but they can't move forward or backward until they hit the sea floor.

How my lungs came to work like lobster gills, I can't explain any better than any lobster. Breathing water comes naturally, I guess. The water is a comfortable kind of weight in my lungs—it brings me ballast. It's a familiar world, more familiar than

walking around on land somehow. Even lobsters can breathe out of water for a couple days, as long as their gills stay damp. A vacation or two on the land has never been out of the question for me either, but who wants to breathe that thin polluted air for long? And with Ryan gone, what's the point of even visiting?

I empty out the pots, knowing the lobstermen will just pull them up and re-bait them. I close the empty pot and put it back down on the Sound floor and reach again for the rope to lead me on. I step over decaying timber covered in algae. It's a minefield of debris, and I can't see more than ten feet in front of me here. I pull my way along the line to the next pot, and my foot gets snagged in a loop. What is the point? None of this changes anything. Instead of freeing myself, I let go of the line completely. I float up and wait for the rope to grow taut.

What a surprise it would be for the lobstermen when they come retrieve their haul. What a catch, they'd say. What a beautiful young lady. Too bad she's dead. And then fish will flop out of my mouth onto their boat, and they'll jump back and a lobsterman will slip on his back, his yellow boots in the air, and the real me will be laughing at them from heaven.

Why am I not in heaven? Is it the way that I died?

The weight of the traps on either side cinch the line tighter around my foot and leave me suspended in the Sound. The current pushes me out, so that I feel like I am flying. But not like a normal person. Like a very depressed person. Not like a bird, but like a kite tied to the hand of her faceless master.

Ryan, I say. You were supposed to look out for me. After all, you're the one who always told me, "That's what big brothers do." You were supposed to keep me from a life stuck on The Island, just like I was going to keep you from it too, and then visit me

far away in college, and you would find new places I would like to go visit. Now look at us. Look how far we made it.

Why should this of all places be our end? You'll show up in one trap or another, but damn are you taking your time. Of course I'll keep looking. Just hold the line for me now. Let me rest in the current. Let me imagine you.

Let's take one more walk, head out on the pier you liked off Cedar Beach. Let's start out with you telling me about your day, and by the time we reach the end, you'll have filled me in on the journey through adolescence—and even how you made it all the way through adulthood and old age this time. The big story is beginning to sound the same. Have we already lived this? What do you have left to say to me really? I smile—a mess of salty tears falling into the salty sea.

We won't be there in twenty years when the pier is washed away. Nobody will be able to walk out past the breakers. There will be nothing for the kids to jump off of and nobody frantically swimming back to safety. Eventually, no one will be left to miss it but us.

If you cut the string, I will only grip it tighter with my hands. Hold the line for me, Ryan. Let's have that windy day on Cedar Beach all over again. You hold the kite when it gusts, and I'll take the line when it calms. Or if you can, take away the ends entirely—encircle me with the strings and tie them together so the kite never breaks away, like it did that day, dragging the whole line after it as it sailed into the sky. Or better yet, let's live as kites! Stir the current that will rip me free from the grip of the ocean floor.

The line tugs at my ankle, and there's my sign—someone is climbing into the pot. I untangle the fine tendrils of the lotus flowers from the line, and pick a small bouquet, in case it's you. With my free hand I pull myself down along the line to the pot. As I tug, the pot lifts off the sea floor and meets me in suspension. I look into an empty train car. I

back out and read the destination map on the side of the train: “The Molten Pit of Hell” leading to “The Hell of Thorns,” and after that, “The Hell of Fire.” There are a lot of places after that, but I’m tired of reading. I get the idea. What happened to all the places I used to go to feel better? I guess no one’s flying kites down here. The glass train doors slide open. This is exactly where I expected to end up for what I did. I enter.

Jules: The Ends of a Line

I’m at the end of the line, again. Ok why not—I’ll get out and see the old town. At least it looks like one of the LIRR lines. But as soon as I hit the blue pleather seat my excitement fades. There’s still water all around the train car and who knows where we are traveling. Is this train even coming up to the surface? Do they remember me up there? I’m so lost in my thinking that I almost miss that it’s Leo walking in from the next train car in a black sweatshirt and jeans, his body filling the entrance way. This train is *not* going up. Are these people, these downers, just one by one, going to keep finding me?

I glare at him through an armful of lotus flowers.

He rubs his jaw with his hand. “Pathetic,” he says.

“Rough day?” I sniffle as water gurgles out of my mouth.

“You’re dripping everywhere.” He shakes his head and stares down at me.

I just stare at him, moving slowly within his new layers of girth. I squeak as I shift in my seat. “You should keep walking. Although from the looks of you that might be too much to ask.”

“How many train cars you got in here?” he asks through pursed lips as if to whistle. “I should probably case it.” His mouth relaxes into a wide grin.

“Just a dozen,” I say. “That repeat endlessly.” He doesn’t have a clue about this place.

“Funny,” he says, towering over me from the isle. “This the ‘Tiffany Line?’ Heading back to your work? How else can three months’ salary last forever? Isn’t that your selling line?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, “that I found an *internship* while you were raping people. I guess rapists don’t need to go through the whole jewelry-buying stage of courting.” I pull the flowers closer to my chest.

“You don’t know me.” His face sours. “Someone told you a story once and now you know me? You’re like a relic in history. Surprised your skin’s not falling off by now down here with the humidity. Must be all those free samples of face cream you gave away in your day. Must be true what they say about the afterlife—there, you get back with interest everything you gave away during life. At least you got something going in your soggy mess. Seem to be turning a bit bluish though with the cold.”

“It’s just the artificial light.” I look away and sigh. “I’m sorry your night didn’t have a happy ending.”

“I bet the same people who built these magnetic trains built those low bridges over the Northern State back in the day. Kept the buses out. Kept the poor off the North Shore. And now, they try to keep us off the trains.”

“You aren’t poor. You went to college.”

“Athletic scholarship.”

I laugh and end up kind of spitting as I try to stop myself. “You mean you weren’t just a really big art student?”

“Not my fault someone blew me up with a body check from behind. If I wasn’t injured, I would still be playing,” he says.

“Right,” I say.

“You don’t know me. What, I can’t sculpt or draw and play lacrosse? That’s just ignorant.”

“Go ahead,” I say defeated. “Go ahead and sit if you are going to sit. I don’t own the place. I just use it like anyone else.”

“I’ll do as I damn well please, thank you.” He scoffs and lowers his massive frame into his seat across from me.

I shake my head at him. “You are not a very nice person,” I say. “You probably just took art because it’s easy.”

“Listen,” he says friendlier, “You know what would help me out of this irritable mood?”

“Yes,” I say.

“A stop in Queens,” he says, pausing to press his lips together. “Take me five minutes. I just need to talk to someone and I’ll get back on feeling much better. Just about every train already stops in Jamaica anyway. Help me out. I’ve had a tough day. Really. And I don’t know this line.”

“Shut up please,” I say sweetly as the train begins to glide forward past a massive rock on the sea bottom that looks a lot like the old two room Port train station house. Of course, we are in the backward facing seats, as if I didn’t already want to vomit on this guy. I look out the windows. Seaweed is streaming down all around us. We’re obviously not going through Queens. “You shouldn’t have come down here. It’s not easy to find your way out.”

“Down here? Sweetheart, I crawled up a long way for these new fancy lines.”

“Leo, this is one step below the subway.”

“Might not be good enough for some people.”

I even smile a little, but can't get any feeling into it. I wonder if he'll be scared by what comes next.

The train jerks back in its tracks—first left and then right as it shifts him back in his seat. It lifts up and then jerks back down with a slam.

“Whoa-whoa-whoa. Are you doing this?” He straightens himself. “I thought this was a magnetic line.”

“The old tracks still have their uses Leo,” I say, just loud enough to be heard as the train shoots out toward the East River. “When you want to visit the good times, you got to use the old lines.”

And before the lights flicker off, I look into his eyes. “You really let me down, Leo.”

He looks away like he doesn't hear me.

“For a little while,” I continue, “I thought we were going to have each other's back all throughout college. But now I can see everything you've done. It's all playing right behind you on the window. Dude, you beat the piss out of people.”

“So.”

“You sold them heroin and then stole from them.”

“Listen,” he says stretching his jaw. “You don't know what hell I've gone through after that.”

The sound of squealing metal closes in, louder as the sea floor drops out and we fall, snaking down through darkness. My body is thrown across the aisle on top of him. He presses me away, but I cling to either side of him on the back of his seat so I don't fall. The lights switch off. I can feel my real smile returning. I hope he pisses his pants.

“Stop pushing,” I breathe against his unshaven cheek. He smells like burnt plastic.

“Stay in your seat, and do whatever you can not to fall.”

“Do you have anything to eat?” he asks.

“For your last meal?”

“Just for being hungry. This is gonna sound weird, but I just got my mouth back.”

I start to laugh but collect myself. “You know how this works, Leo,” I whisper into his ear. “To get fed around here, to find a little something to eat, you need to have given it away when you were up there.” I roll my eyes toward the surface of the water. “But you kept it all for yourself, so now there’s nothing left.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“What did you ever give away?”

“Candy,” he says. “Cigarettes.”

“Well, maybe whomever you gave them to, will come bring you some,” I think for a moment. “Or . . . in your position, the onus might be on you to go find them.”

“Speak like a normal person,” he says. “Onus? Please.”

The front of the train picks up momentum as it coils around itself and then dives straight down like a line of string falling from air. He grabs me with one hand and the seat with the other as the now vertical train plummets and then slows as if moving through a more viscous substance than the salt water before. Gravity presses me against him, chest to chest. The train drifts down in the direction I’m looking, reaching for the new bottom. We hold tight and wait.

“We should get out,” he says. “Open the emergency exit and we can swim for it.”

“You can try. Although you are pretty heavy to be climbing around,” I say.

He lets go of me and reaches upward along the window, but the emergency exit is several seats above us. He holds himself back in his seat with both hands, breathing heavy.

I don't want to go here anymore. "It was a mistake," I say. "Leo, tell them to send me back. Tell them I won't do it again. I want to feel better. I want the same choices I used to have. But I forget what they were."

He stares over his right shoulder, down the aisle of the train car, out the train door window, and into the pit of blackness beyond.

"I'm not exactly friendly with the visitors," he says.

I feel a tremor in his hand gripping the armrest at my hip and in the other one shaking near my shoulder. I know it's to stabilize us, but it still gives me the heebie-jeebies. He grips the chair with both hands again and I hold the chair behind him. As long as the train descends straight down, we're stable.

"Maybe if you try to talk to them," I offer.

"I think they're more concerned with the past than with the future."

I could cry, but I keep my eyes fixed on one of his shaking hands—they did that in college. He had been like my big brother in Bio with Professor Sorintino, and at the parties he'd step between me and any guy that hit on me in any kind of a sleazy way. Didn't hurt that he was a couple years ahead of me in school. Of course, I had to pay for it by kissing him on the cheek. He was always so calm. He reminded me of Ryan in that way. I first saw his shaking when he confronted me, stalked me, outside my dorm room, and pinned me to the brick wall, telling me he heard I had been talking about him, that he "suspected" I had "a crush" on him, and to quit being jealous and stop. The talking part at least was true. I told every girl I knew that he was a rapist. He betrayed me. My brother would never have done what he did.

He laughed the rape accusations off all around school, but the tremors were there every time a group of us passed him. After he grabbed me that night, I let him win, and I stopped talking. It would have felt worse, but my friend stepped in and filed the charges

the next week, something I thought she'd never do. Something I think she'll never forgive me for—for convincing her to carry that night forward.

I look at him now, his gaze cold and looking through the black window beside us, and think how he was someone's little boy. Maybe still is. It's so sad when you think about it.

The train begins to arc and gravity is pulling me over his chair toward the ceiling. "I'm losing my grip," I tell him. "I don't want to fall."

The lights along the isle of the train car flip on. I release him, and I scramble upward to the door at the top end of the train car and wedge myself between two rows of seats facing one another just before the doorframe. I don't like to burn. If I'm honest, sometimes I like to watch, but I refuse to enjoy the coming show—I'm just not that kind of person anymore. Even the people with power can't wield it long. And if they don't use it well, just look at where it takes them. It makes me so sad to think of how much time I spent fighting for attention, for money, for jobs in advertising that I hated anyway. What good is influencing someone to buy you dinner? Or to buy your company's shit?

Leo tries to find a more stable position, but his legs flip over his head. He catches himself with a jolt, his body dangling as his hands grip the seat. He looks down at the fire through the open train car door. His feet gain footing on back of the chairs behind him. At first, the flames are distant, but then they grow as if exploding through a long tunnel. The glow appears to the left, then moves to the right, and finally steadies in the center, like the front car of the train has swallowed a ball of fire—a magnificent red and yellow liquid, boiling upward and now lapping at the windows at the end of our car.

"Pretty," I say.

"Julie, right?" he asks looking up at me.

“Jules,” I say, hurt that he could forget, and mad at myself for caring. My feet find support on the back of a seat.

“I should have remembered that,” he says.

“That’s about all the time we have,” I whisper to him as the liquid fire rises around him from the darkness. “I think it’s better to have power over yourself.” He’s still watching the fire, hardly listening. “Hey Leo,” I say.

“Yeah,” he says not turning around.

“If you get out of here someday, will you pull up my line? I need a vacation.”

“Yeah sure,” he says.

“Even after what happened?”

“Yeah, don’t worry,” he says, “The grudge thing doesn’t work for me around here.”

“Yeah.” I say, “Ain’t that the truth.”

Dark shapes rise up from the falling molten head of the train. For just an instant I can see hospital corridors and childhood surgeries, the drugs, the selling, the rape and the fights, all the belligerence reaching out for him. The denizens appear carrying chain as thick as their bodies, made up of industrial versions of every ring, earrings, or gold chain he ever stole. They’ve come to collect. He’d trade the coke back to them, but it’s all inside of him—he smoked or injected it all. His body is all he has left to offer. They grab him with their strong, but fluid arms. They move as waves of shadow in something like human form. He’s thinking only of how its Saturday and he should be home, helping his mother in the yard.

People shouldn’t be pulled under the water. There’s good in everyone.

“Stop crying,” he says. “I know them. It’s cool.”

“It’s not all about you,” I say, spitting up black water.

“They stole drugs from me first, so I stole from them.” He bows his head, and the shadow shape of a denizen places a chain around his neck as if it were a lei. Others bind his limbs. Leo doesn’t fight. He looks at me as they wrap him in chain. “I used to remember, every motion, every slight. Store it all inside. Then I had my time to stick them back with prods. They’d get theirs too. But I’m done. They can kill me for a hundred years, but when they let me go, I’m not coming back to them next time.”

I don’t know, Leo. There’s a lot of habits to undo.

They dive into the molten fire below, the Asuras pulling Leo down by chain, screaming as they go, thirsting like a group of drunk frat guys, heading to a football game. They are all consumed by the darkness.

I never wanted you to die. But I should have warned you: good intentions never save anyone. I loved too much and never got anything for it. If anyone just loved me the way I loved them, I wouldn’t be here.

But then I remember Ryan, and the selfless way he loved me. It always restores my faith. I will never stop loving him that same way. I’ll empty the cages with that love, and maybe one day, if my love is perfect, a cage will catch him, and he’ll show me the line that travels back where we left off.

In the glow of red water alongside the train, there are flower stalks wrapping around the train running upward through the water, holding it in suspension. I hadn’t noticed when we stopped moving. I put my palm to the glass and push down the emergency exit bar with a crunch. Think I’ll skip the next few stops today. The window opens and I’m through, back where I started, watching the lobster pot settle back onto the sea floor. I unhook the line from my leg and keep walking. Time to check the traplines. It’s not our deaths that bother me, it’s that love itself can die. But with Ryan, the *idea* at

least is always there to return to—the idea is never dead. I loved you all, I call to them. I loved you all so much.

Vanessa: A Light at the Surface

The dead watch me. Some wide-eyed and still, others shifting, but always they keep me in their periphery as the train rises through the tunnel under the city. Like everyone else, I still don't know where to go. I thought I would relive that feeling of first heading off to college—no weight, just the promise of choosing right within an infinity of choices. But all those flowers have bloomed and died. If there is a light, I will go toward it. If there is a light, please let it lead me forward. I'm so sick of looking back. The dead eye me as if they had just watched the last train scene with Leo and I on TV. Had they? I've got nothing to say to you, I think, but still, they stare at me from within the train car, as if looking for an explanation for my actions, or wondering what crazy thing I might do next. I stay in my seat. In their diversity—I already know—they're all waiting for different words. One of them yells at me in Yiddish. I raise my palms to quiet him and he leans back in awe.

“She sees me!” he screams. “She sees me!” His whole body convulses, and he looks skyward and disappears.

The hum of the train deepens as we emerge from the vacetrain tube through the mantel, into the crust of the earth. The lights flicker and their eyes move to the 3D screens all along the walls of the train. Their faces glow with what I take to be advertisements, these short cuts that entice. I've seen lunatics on trains before, but this one is full of them. Those standing gesture as if they are one of the characters in the advertisement. One foot is placed in front of the other and they extend a hand in conversation. An advertisement presents women rolling tortillas on their bare thighs as

they stand on a dirt floor before a stove, laughing. Entranced, the passengers' tongues search around inside their mouths as their eyes roll backward, and their lips pucker as if they could suck nourishment from the air. Another advertisement displays people on picnic blankets in a field, and several passengers reach forward and pluck out a ripe strawberry or peach from the screen.

Those sitting jump up, and some dive right into the scene. The screen envelops them like water, until the color fades and the screen turns as black as the night sea. With the slurp of a vacuum, the dead disappear, one after the next. Our speed lessens as we approach the underbelly of rock beneath the city. On the screens, I see an orgy of legs and skirts and half-dressed men moving between them. Laughter grows and the dead dance into the wombs that awaits them until there are only a handful of us left. There's nothing on those lines for me. I refuse to follow. You can't make the world *right* by reindulging in the pleasures of the past. Or in paying back the trauma. And there are endless amounts of both down there. There is a mirror image of the New York color-coded subway system, incomplete and with extra lines. There is a flashing yellow light in the Village along the orange line. I try to remember what's located there, but the hum and echo of this vactrain tube cuts out and breaks my course of thought.

The train emerges above the surface into silence, switching to the open air local, hovering above the maglev track. The city is behind us and the screens are clear, reflecting only the surroundings. The Jersey cars move rapidly beneath us: sweeping in loops—the jughandles bloom as we continue to climb. The self-driving cars still use the old loops, and the train mirrors their movement, falling to the right as we spiral upward. The remaining passengers close their eyes, meditating. They look more familiar, but only vaguely so. They stack their hands in their laps and fall backward through the windows, like moving through, but not breaking, a soap bubble. We arc above the city like a plane,

and I realize this train does not have a destination, and for a moment I fear I am on a flight about to crash through a tower. But we're too high. We're the ones selecting the specific route back, and the time to choose is running out.

The mist of the atmosphere coalesces in the shape of lilies, and the fallen passengers are caught by the soft petals—a puff of water vapor released where each one lands. They slide down the tube of the stalks without friction, and might not even know they are returning to the earth. Or others fall right through the crown of flowers and their speed increases until they are out of view. Where they go, I don't know.

I am alone in a room full of windows, the final dandelion seed to take flight. I watch the Hudson until it appears as just one small puddle in a continent of puddles. I see all the way across the Great Plains, to the twelve-thousand, thirteen-thousand, fourteen-thousand foot peaks of that wall of rock, the mountains of the Great Divide. Time races now. All across the land, the water rises, people climbing over one another for the last gulp of air.

I look back at New York City where there is a ship leaving. The image grows until I can see a woman with golden-curls reading a piece of parchment. My hair does that too in the humidity. I read over her shoulder without leaving the sky:

I see them
in the world, floundering around,
people immersed in craving
for states of becoming.
Base people moan in the mouth of death
their craving, for states of becoming & not-,
unallayed

See them,
floundering in their sense of mine,
like fish in the puddles

of a dried-up stream—
 and, seeing this,
 live with no mine,
 not forming attachment
 for states of becoming

The woman's wind-blown hair brushes the words from sight. I shake, in shock, and look further back to the Village within the dark city. There is a single light in a room on the eighth floor of a ten-story building. The image of the window grows on the screen. The light is from an old lantern set on the floor—brilliant and white and steady, it fills the room. There is a face with broad nostrils and long hair that I recognize behind the lantern.

“Give it away,” Kairos says to me, “or it will bring you back.”

And I realize that my hand has been holding my pocket knife all this time.

I step up on a train seat like I am walking up a staircase. In the screen of the window, the steady lantern light grows in intensity.

A bell dings, and I step into that screen, and walk into the next room.

I'm gazing out a window as the sunset breaks through storm clouds along the horizon. Smaller buildings surround me. I must be in the Village. I'm dressed in jeans and a black blouse, a black leather purse hanging from my shoulder. In the yellow and orange glow of the setting sun, the building behind me reflects the other buildings in its boxes. I walk from the back of the room to the west windows. I pull down on the drapes, hung like a bell from the middle of the twin windows, and arch my head south to find the towers to orient myself, and then I remember—they're gone.

I let go of the drapes and I sit down on a red loveseat. Kairos is seated on the floor in the front of the room. Or at least, I assume that's him, facing the front of the room.

There is row after row of meditation cushions between us. There is an unlit lantern beside him.

This is the center where Jules and I came to practice meditation during college at Hofstra. It was a trip to get into the Village, but we made it in every week, and eventually we brought Kai—a childhood friend of Jules who reappeared in our Buddhism course—along also. I can't remember why I stopped practicing. Was it after bumping into Leo here? I mean, good for him to come to a place like this, but my breath froze just having him in the same room. I was sure he had seen me, and would come over and say sorry—but of course, we never even said hello. But Leo's not here now, I remind myself, and I'm ready to start over.

As if on cue, Kai picks up the thin metal handle on the lantern and it drops in such a way that it strikes the metal body with a pleasant ting. "Welcome back," he says. His voice is quieter, a little dazed even.

I walk over and sit on the zafu next to him. The jeans stretch, but not enough for me to get comfortable. I should know by now not to wear jeans here, but I always did—I guess it's one of my habits. Jules told me to buy a new pair of yoga pants, but I didn't.

"We can't stay here," he says, still looking toward the front of the room. "This is a nice place to start, but if we want to get serious, we've got to get into the desert."

"How did you know it was me?" I ask, placing my purse on the floor.

"Burnt sugar," he says. "When you come into my room, it always smells like burnt sugar."

"When I come into the Forest Dhamma Center you mean?" I ask him.

He turns toward me, but his eyes look past me. I search his face. He's much older. Fifties. His hair is still long and full but white, his face with deep crow's feet and smile lines along his mouth.

“I can’t see you,” he says. “Diabetes thing. Vision goes in and out. It’s one of those ‘out’ days. I’ll come out of it. Always do. All started with the sunset. It was doing this thing over the Sand Coral Canyons. I just had to see it,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “Can I help?”

“I should tell Isabel that I’m back. Had a hell of a time getting back to Boulder. Can still taste that Utah dirt in my mouth.”

“You’re in Colorado?”

He nods.

“You can’t stay here,” I offer, looking at the exits. “You’ve got to find someplace else to go.”

“Thanks,” he says. “It’s nice of you to come find me. I hope you can stay for the whole sit.” He makes the ting sound again.

“Do you want me to light that for you?” I say, immediately realizing how foolish I was if he can’t see anyway. “It’s so dark in here,” I add, again scanning the exits.

“Oh yeah,” he says. I take the heavy old thing onto my lap, the fuel swishing in the bottom of the tank. “Pump that sucker,” Kai says, but in his blindness, he’s not looking at the lantern at all.

I start pumping. “My father used one of these when I was young. When a hurricane knocked out power for a week out on The Island.” I find the string and bunch up the mantles and tie them. My hands remember. This was the part that I did. The cold lifts from out of my gut as I remember that day. It’s been so long since I felt my whole body.

He slides me the book of matches and I strike one, setting the mantles up in a puff of flame until they become a web of black ash. The mesh of the mantels look like the empty bait bags that Jules kept as souvenirs from her uncle’s lobster boat.

“Make sure you light all of it,” he says and reaches over to open the valve.

“Too much,” I say, placing my fingers on his callused ones and move the valve ever so slightly backward, until I hear the fuel spitting into the structure. I move the flame to the mantle as he chuckles in approval. Flames again engulf the mantle.

“Now open the valve all the way, and pump. Make the sucker glow.”

The mantle absorbs the flame and every thread becomes a dazzling white.

Illuminated, I can see out of the doorway and on the stairway wall. Someone has spray-painted something there. I read it out loud: “Whatever the darkness, with one match it has to go.”

“That seems just about right,” he says, closing his eyes as if he were feeling the light strike him. “I could always light the thing alright, but I never brought it to the right places. Always a part of me in darkness that doomed the rest, that ate me up.”

“Didn’t we light this with a monk visiting Forest Dhamma?” I look up at the ceiling to help me remember. “He read a talk while we meditated. He used the lantern as some kind of metaphor.” I close my eyes, struggling for the memory. My arm is fatigued from holding the lantern up. I set it down and put my hands in my lap.

“Protecting the flame is mindfulness,” Kai says. “Lighting all sides of the mantle is spreading the breath through the body. The kerosene is the right effort that grows mindfulness into the white light of the concentration—that steady light that fills the room.”

I spread the breath through my body. I start to meditate.

“But I don’t know what to do with it once it’s bright,” Kai says. His words soften until they are barely audible. “Even a bright mind can fall. Believe me. We fall hard.”

My skin is electric. I sit up straight. It’s been too long. Why did I ever stop? I close my eyes. My nerves are fried from the journey, but the moment I focus on the

breath, a steadier energy rises from my core out to my extremities. I keep my focus in my center and keep the ember stoked. I let every channel in my body open from there until my whole body glows. I'm ready to start again.

"If I ever get out of this city," I say. "I'll come find you. I always wanted to see the Great Divide."

Vanessa: Cigarettes, Candy

The city traffic, even horns and shouts outside are ambient noise, but the footsteps coming up the stairwell break my concentration immediately. It's the same room but it looks different somehow. I lift the light around to fill the corners of the room, but Kai's long gone.

There's a massive form in the doorway. My whole body goes cold. I can tell by the way he's shifting to make me out behind the light, that it's Leo. I assume he will kill me, but maybe I can reason my way out of it. I could apologize about the worst parts of me coming out on the train but that won't work. He stumbles over to me, his feet bare and blistered, his clothes in tatters. He's bald with red and black burns across his scalp. I can't tell if the convex patches are fried skin or the remains of hair. Maybe they are both.

"Cigarettes. Candy!" he says dropping himself onto a zafu beside me. Is that all he wants? His knees are a foot off the floor as he crouches in Indian style with his hands out to me, gesturing: feed me. He rocks his body forward and back casting giant shadows behind him.

I lean over to open my purse and he grabs at it, knocking half the contents onto the floor.

"Leo!" I say, but it's useless.

He spreads the contents across the floor and rummages further into my purse, taking it into his lap. I lean back, relinquishing it. He shuffles a pack of Marlboro Reds out. He searches around with his eyes nervously into the corners of the room and dumps the cigarettes into his mouth all at once.

“You must have . . . a lot to say,” I say trying to slow him.

He snatches the lighter too, and tossing the purse back to the table, furiously paints the ends of the cigarettes with flame. Half are lit, and as his rib cage lifts with each rapid inhale, the flame spreads until he’s sucking on one big torch. He pulls on the cigarettes, exhales, and pulls again as the fire reduces to red embers.

“They’re” he says, but interrupts himself with another inhale, “gonna get me.” He smokes again. “You have my candy!”

I search my purse, and locate a box of Lemon Heads wedged in the bottom of it. He grabs the box and with his other hand removes the cigarettes from his mouth—one cart-wheeling down onto the floor. He pours the candy into his mouth, his eyes wide and looking at the ceiling. He seals his lips and coughs white smoke through his nose.

Amazed, I just watch.

“I got away,” he says, his voice garbled. Yellow-brown juice dribbles down his chin.

“They’ll get me,” he says, the Lemon Heads clinking against his teeth, he swallows hard this time before bringing the cigarettes back to his mouth—they flare in all directions, burning away.

“Don’t,” I almost say, but put my half-raised hand back down as two more of the cigarettes crash back to the floor. I bring a napkin from my purse and pad at the mess of embers.

“I got,” he swirls the Lemon Heads to one side of his mouth and inhales the cigarettes, “the message.” Coughing, he continues “They don’t,” and pulling again, “gotta stick me more,” and again, he swallows hard.

The three-inch wide black marks on his body between torn clothing are actually open wounds. I look closer. “Swords?” I ask.

He nods.

There are also purple-black holes, perfectly spaced an inch apart all over his body—his face, his seared scalp, all over his arms exposed where his sleeves burnt off. “What are the holes?”

“The thorns,” he says. “And there was the box of flame again.”

I start to gather the spilled contents of my purse as he takes the cigarettes to his mouth once again, the growing ash breaking, and spilling across his lap. His whips his body around to check the hallway entrance behind him, and then turns back to me. He chews on what was left of the hard candy. It sounds like his teeth are breaking.

Leo looks down and for an instant he calms. I can see him, the person I knew, before it all went to shit. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I knew I should have called you after. It was a good date, but I had other problems.”

“I should have called the police that night.”

He stares at me, taking the burning filters out of his mouth and then swallows the whole mess of Lemonheads and tobacco smoke. “Yeah,” he says. I assume he might have more to say, but I see in his eyes that the conversation is over.

“So that’s all,” I say, looking at the mess on the floor. I sweep the remaining items back into my purse—some playing cards, a notebook, a nail file, and pause at the ivory of the pocket knife handle. He reaches for it, but I already have it in my hand. I

open it and stab down at his hand. My hands recede, shaking. The knife is left sticking straight out of his hand, and then my heart starts to race.

Both our eyes are set on his hand as it bleeds.

“Why did you go for the knife?” I shriek.

He looks at me and I meet his eyes.

“It’s ok,” he says. “I was going to open it and hand it to you anyway.”

Two heavily muscled men stand in the doorway of the meditation room. Their shirts are some type of latex or Kevlar tucked into bloodstained cargo pants. Hell wardens. At first, I think they are smoking too, but then I realize the yellow and red are the burning vapors of their eyes.

Leo follows my gaze to the doorway and then looks back into my eyes. “Pull it out,” he says.

“No! What?” The knife is half-way to the hilt.

“There’s not a lot of time,” he says.

I grab it with both hands and he grimaces as I work it back and forth to free it from the floor. As soon as I lift it out he stands and races to the exit in the rear of the room. The wardens dart after him.

I walk to the back of the room and sit back down on the red loveseat. I watch the far exit in case anyone comes back. I run my hand along the linen upholstery, and I finally get it. How long am I going to push furniture from one room to the next? I think of all the words I will never say to him. I angle the open blade toward the light, allowing the black blood to drip off the tip and onto the floor.

“I know your problems,” I say quietly, “because you made them mine.”

Vanessa: Amelie

When I look up, I am closer to the window, already looking in on a different room.

It was winter. We were sitting on opposite sides of the carpet. Tapestries covered the cement block walls, and poinsettias lined the windowsill. The sun slipped through the windows not covered by the oak tree and through the half-open blinds, making squares of light between us, warming the floor. I made sure to sit directly in a warm square, and then I followed the light as it moved.

We had been hanging out for a few weeks when he came over to my dorm room to study for a Bio final.

“You’ve been quiet,” I said finishing my portion of the annotation.

“Huh?” he said. His dark eyes focused as he looked up from the carpet.

I wanted to do something to make it go away. I knew what he was asking. Is it my fault that he’s suffering? Is it worse because I’m not making the call on the situation one way or the other? “Do you have the next one?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “I don’t. Sorry, I’m distracted.”

I leaned my head back against the cold concrete wall.

“You know, I don’t want to study with anyone else, but you’re pretty distracting.”

He gave me that smile—slightly pained but toothy and generous.

But then again, it was annoying the way he didn’t even hide his desire. What was I supposed to say, “Sorry let’s not talk about sexual tension, let’s do Bio instead?” But then, I was flattered too if I was being honest. Or maybe it was that I was supposed to be flattered?

“What do you mean?” I moved my pen to my mouth and almost bit it, but then worried I was doing that whole alluring and available thing. I put my pen down. I wanted

to get through my first psychology classes without bombing anything. We could have this conversation over break.

He let it drop and I found most of the remaining answers for the homework. He wrote them down saying, “Ahh,” or “That’s right,” or “That’s what I thought.” I was being helpful, or I was getting the homework session over with, or I wanted him to like me until I decided if we should date.

“We can finish up after the weekend, if you want,” I said. “I know you’ve got the Knicks game.”

“Yeah,” he said, “can’t wait.”

At some point in the week, he had an extra ticket. I thought he might ask me to come, but he didn’t. Not that I cared about basketball, but it would have been polite. It would have clarified his intentions.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t much help today,” he said as we packed up. “I’ll help you more when you take your art requirement.”

And I guess that was the moment, I thought he might be ok.

* * *

It was the next weekend, or maybe the one after, and the girls were all going out to the end of the semester formal. We had been doing this game while studying, treating each other like a piece of furniture: his back, a place for my head; or my lap, a footrest; or I’d use his legs to lean my back against. It was a concession for him, to show him that I did care and that his feelings mattered too.

My roommate, Jules, was standing at her dresser, putting on lipstick. “You’re testing him, aren’t you?” She had this way of cutting to the chase.

“Who?”

“Who?” she repeated, puckering her lips. She blew her reflection a kiss.

“No. Maybe. I don’t know. He seems like a good guy, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know V. You should watch *Amelie* together and find out.”

I laughed. “Oh right. *Amelie*? If he likes it, then he’s a keeper?”

“Not if he *likes* it. If a guy can’t just snuggle to *Amelie*, he’s an asshole.” She fished around for some eyeliner. “That way, before you get involved . . . at least you can’t say you didn’t know.”

“So I’m getting involved. Is that right?”

She smiled and turned her head to the side. “You’re giving that guy blue-balls and you know it. At least figure out what you’re going to do.”

“I know what *you* would do.”

“Bitch!” she gasped.

I laughed. “Slut. And that’s not going to give him blue-balls?”

“A little,” she finished her eyeliner, “but he’ll understand he’s got a shot if he plays it right. Give him a chance. I bet he snuggles up like a pup.”

“And if he gets the wrong idea?”

“Asshole!” she laughed. “No. Just leave the door open to your suite-mates, he’ll get it. I told Leo he should come to Mexico with a friend or two on spring break. I thought it might help keep the riffraff away.”

“I don’t know. I’m going to have a pretty full schedule in spring . . .”

“Don’t even,” she threatened me with her eye-liner. “You better find time,” she said, putting it back in the drawer. “And we need to buy those tickets soon.”

* * *

Jules was leaving as Leo and I came in with *Amelie*. She shook her finger at us as she closed the door. “You two behave now,” and her big teeth and her long black hair thrown over one shoulder. I locked the door because I’m paranoid, not because I had plans. It

was pretty stupid. I wanted us to have privacy and a snuggle without being judged. He pretended not to notice and fiddled with the remote.

He set down his Marlboro Reds and a pack of Lemonheads on table in front of us, and we sat down on the red loveseat in front of the TV.

“We can share,” he said. “I brought you two of my favorites.”

“Gosh thanks!” I said at my desk near the door, shutting down my computer.

“Too bad I can’t smoke in my dorm room.” I laughed, “Maybe I can start a habit after the movie.”

“There you go,” he laughed, and we laid down, spooning on the loveseat.

A half hour into the movie we were still spooning, and his hand was growing more restless on my hip. It was searching, pawing, now. He was not passing the test. I just elbowed him, and he backed off and chuckled as I got further and further into the movie. It was when Amelie’s mother dies. She was the mattress for the suicide jumper, which is funny at first, but when you think about it, it’s really, really sad. And on top of that, Amelie has to live even more isolated within her imagination at home. That was enough for her. But I learned that night that even a beautiful imagination can’t save you.

He was quiet, and his hand was still. I thought maybe he was getting it.

I couldn’t see it then, but there was a shadow outside, walking through the air toward my third-story window. It was as if, instead of a courtyard, there was another, darker, three-story building that abutted my dorm. I never considered how many worlds might be overlapping this one, or how everyone has voices that infiltrate their minds. The shadow passed into the room, and walked rapidly behind the loveseat and then stopped. Inside Leo’s head, it bent its voice to mimic his. “If you . . .” it said and then started again. “If you are going to *do* it, now is the time.” The shadow then left the room.

To me, at that moment, everything seemed ok. It was my favorite scene: when Amelie is feeling perfect, deciding on her plan for happiness, and doing good for others.

Leo emerged from his rest and kissed my neck *right* then.

My skin crawled. I elbowed him in the chest twice and huffed, but I could tell by the way he rolled back to me and put his arms around me with a suffocating grip that something had changed.

That's when his hand started to travel to the string of my yoga pants and paused. I rolled away but the loveseat was too small to get more than a few inches of separation. It was my favorite part. She is just starting to act on her plan. She sees a blind man in the center of the road. I figured I'd give him until the end of the scene to get the hint and if he did anything else I'd grab a chair or something, and then after he left, I would never fucking call him again because he'd failed the *Amelie* test.

"Watch this part," I said. And he did. His hand stopped and he brought it back to my waist. He watched the whole scene as she not only helps the blind man across the street, but starts running him down the sidewalk, describing the people, pointing out the source of the smells, all the pastries, and meats and cheeses, and leaves him at the subway where she knows he'll find his way and she is off to help others.

He kissed my neck again, and that's when his hand moved back under my yoga pants and into my underwear, quickly, and I was surprised but all I could do was roll my hips away and grunt a "Hey!" and take a few uneven breaths as his hand rested there and pressed. I should have stood up, but I reached down to catch the hand to still him, to toe the line. We would now have to have the conversation. I didn't want him to be a complete fucker.

But his brain had already turned off. He wasn't letting me go. He closed his eyes as if he was enjoying the taste of the air around him. He breathed in deeply, all the

shadows of the room filling him with their power. He smiled. But if he smiled through the rest of his life, I think somewhere he knew, the time would run out and he'd come back to this loveseat. Some people never think about repercussions though, let alone a next life. It was convenient.

He slid off his pants with his free hand. "Hey!" I said again but my throat had already tightened. Amelie was running again. I kicked his shin. I didn't want to look at him. I waited for an apology but he just dragged my yoga pants down over my hips instead. I tried to get off the loveseat but he just held me by my belly and pulled me closer to him.

"I don't want to," I said in my clearest most stoic voice.

He took his hand and snaked it along my thigh. "I'll just get close. See if you like it." His hand moved back up my body.

"Stop," I said. "You're creeping me out. You need to get out of here." I tried to move my leg off the loveseat again, but it was like it didn't belong to me. That's when I lost control of my whole body. I wanted to run away or hit him, but I couldn't move.

He slid his hand up the back of my neck, his nails digging into me. He twisted my face into my pillow, and his weight rolled against my back. I felt an instant shot of adrenalin and spun back at him with my elbow toward his face. "What the fuck Leo!" I sputtered, but only hit his shoulder as he rolled on top of me. My left hand was pinned. He pushed my face back into the pillow and forced his hand between my legs. My right hand raced his, trying to catch it at his crotch but he had it. My hand flailed toward his cock, his balls, to grab anything but I grabbed only his wrist, and clawed his leg, which made him laugh, like this all was exactly the kind of fun he had in mind. He was pointing himself into me, his weight on my back. My arm flailing, scratching, hitting, as he broke into me.

It didn't take long. He stuffed my head into the pillow until I couldn't breathe, until my head was swimming and my arm gave up and fell. He shook the bed and moaned and let go of my neck and wrapped his arms around my chest and arms and rolled my limp body with his, back to our sides. He shook softly as I gasped for air under his weight. He moaned again and then let me go, one arm at a time.

"You're beautiful," he said. "You're so fucking beautiful."

I took in more air and he petted my hair as my breath returned to normal. He actually petted my hair. I watched Amelie returning an old box of trinkets, and cried with the old man she returns it to.

"Shhhh," he said, "it's ok. I love you."

"I want you to go, ok?" I said, and my tears came quicker, but now in silence as the old man, inspired by Amelie, decides to finally make up with his family.

"Why you gotta hurt my feelings that way?" There was an edge to his voice.

I hoped if I did not speak, if I remained completely still, he would leave. Each time he moved close to see if I was awake, I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes. But he stayed. I thought of where else I could go. My friends were all out, but I could wander through campus. Everywhere I thought of going though, I imagined running into people, the wrong people. I just wanted to be alone, to shower and cry.

Was he staying so he could say it was all ok because we snuggled throughout the whole movie? As my mind raced, the rest of the movie resolved—the whole string of good deeds up until the painter tells Amelie to pursue her own happiness: to find this man that she loves, and if she doesn't, she may regret it forever—to be unhappy forever.

When the credits rolled, he climbed over me as I pretended to sleep. He put on his boots as I schemed. I thought about grabbing a knife, but he would see it coming. I

thought about grabbing a knife after he left, but turning it on myself would not eradicate my fury.

And so he made his way over without a word. Another pat on the head. A pause like he might kiss me. He would turn his back, and I would grab the pocketknife in the drawer of the coffee table. My body tensed as I calculated how much time I needed. I opened my eyes just a crack, but he was watching me as he turned. It was as if he knew what I was thinking. As he walked to the door and opened it. He watched me all the way.

He held my gaze for a moment—his face smirking. His eyes seemed to have lost their light. He remained so secure in his body, as he stepped through the door, as if no one in the world could touch him. But I vowed the next time he left an opening, I would be ready.

I have been carrying that knife ever since, just waiting for the place to stick it.

Vanessa: Don't Run, Don't Sink

I clean the blade by running it along the red loveseat. I want to stand up and run to the station. To find the most distant destination and buy that ticket—to become someone else in a different place. It was after all what I had always done. College on Jules's sofa, then her bed, then the South Pacific, and eventually the Windows of the World. But none of the endings were happy. Thunder rolls overhead and I can hear the first drops of water fall against the window beside me. I take a deep breath and walk over to it. I have to stop myself from looking left and right for the towers.

I think of all of the people that died as I look at the city through the veil of rain falling harder now, and beyond them, of everyone I knew in that life: family, friends, even the people I passed daily but never knew. There was the man who sold flowers on the corner of 1st Ave. and 10th and the cute barista near Union Square where I got my

morning coffee on the way to work. I think of everything we did to help one another, everything we gave. I whisper the names of those I remember, and picture the faces of those I can't name. I can feel them in the room, or on the floors above me, or below, or standing in one of the windows somewhere in the city, or elsewhere—wherever they've gone. The rain downpours, drumming out the traffic, the sounds of car doors opening and closing, and any footsteps in the stairwells. I imagine them looking back at me through their windows humming an "Amen" or "Om" in unison, mumbling it through the storm until it rises and collects over our heads, to meld along the roof beams that sound in a series of pops. I close my eyes and give myself to the sensation of being lifted.

I imagine the waves of our intentions as the rain falling on rooftops everywhere, surrounding all those in houses on earth and in their cars down narrow cobblestone streets in the old parts of towns, and in the new developments; falling over umbrellas and waterproof jackets, those running for cover, and those resigned to getting soaked. I imagine it falling over the hospitals, the suburbs, and the quiet hills of the Catskills, and colder on the Adirondack peaks beyond. I watch it move out east, across beach towns and dissipating somewhere over the ocean, where new storms grow and spread across the next continent.

I call the names until I run out of names. I picture faces until they stop appearing. I lose myself to the feeling.

In the background of the storm, a part of me notices that the sound has changed into the voices of others, bouncing back to me. At first, I can't place the overlapping phrases, but then a voice in the background seems to find a familiar cadence. Another name. One I haven't thought of. And then I hear it everywhere. From every voice I tune into. A two-word prayer. All together, the repeating syllables are still out of sync, and I have to listen closely to be sure. Like falling rain, each voice offers it in their own time,

interrupting one another, as the room grows in volume. Finally, it crescendos and falls to a final person or two saying a name. Yes, they are saying my name. Vanessa Sugato.

They are calling my name.

I open my eyes, fighting tears, and sit back down on the red loveseat. The light from the lantern is blinding. I close the blade, dropping it in the same motion. It falls and keeps falling. I do not hear where it lands. The windows of the room move around me, until I can hear only one familiar voice calling me.

“Jules?” I call back. “Jules is that you?”

I put my hand on the string around my neck, and follow it down to the heimat—*matau*—a stylized fish hook bone carving—resting on the center of my chest. I have not forgotten you, Jules. But all I see is the same blond woman on the boat, reading a book. “Can you get us across?” I ask her, but she cannot hear me through the wind. She does not turn around. I try again to contact Jules. “We’ve got to get out of here,” I warn her. “Jules, the waters are rising. Get on the boat.” But the voices are all quiet. I peer over the blond woman’s shoulder on the ferry and read:

When embraced
the rod of violence
breeds danger & fear:

The words disappear faster than I can read and I catch only fragments of the text as it unravels in her hand.

Seeing people floundering
like fish in small puddles,

I saw nothing that wasn't laid claim to.

but competition,

you run
 But simply on pulling

you don't run,
 you don't sink.

There is just one window looking across the puddles, all the way to the Great Divide. I
 step into that window.

Somebody, take me across.

Vanessa: Deep Sea Blossoms

I wake in Port, by the dock, on the red loveseat and sit up to face a draped window. On
 my left and right are Jules' shining dark purple sofas, with matching purple pillows.
 Something is different, but I can't say what, only that I don't feel like myself. I'm in my
 underwear with a sheet around me—but that's how I sleep here. It's more in my mind.
 My thoughts have less weight somehow. I hear her walk in behind me—don't ask me
 how she got there. It is all very much like waking up from a night of drinking when you
 sleep an unreasonably long time but when you open your eyes you don't feel sick, in fact
 you feel outstanding just to be alive, after poisoning yourself purposely—although you
 never meant to do it *that* much. But the point is it feels like a new life and that's what it is
 like to see Jules. And yeah, we had a few nights like that in college so I assume that
 might be the association. She has this tight gray t-shirt. She is such trouble. My first
 thought is, Thirty. Still no bra! She has her traveling pants on. She walks over to her red
 backpack right by the door, and pulls on the compression straps so that the top pocket lid
 secures some coiled rope lying under it. Where is she going?

It could be any day. But it isn't. It is the day after some decision, some change. I
 can't tell what it is yet, so I just repeat the same question as yesterday, the same as last

year, the same as college: “Bra shopping so early?” If she can just be with me for a day, and watch the way I see her, I know she’d be cured. No, these are my crazy thoughts. I can’t think them . . . not, so early. Not all at once.

She walks back to the bathroom.

“Why do I feel like you are up to something terrible?” I ask.

Her arms are palm up by her side. “I’m sorry,” she says speaking rapidly. “I sold the apartment, or I blew it up, or I mean, it’s about to blow up. Anyway, we can’t stay here. I changed everything. Every place you can find me is fucked.”

“I don’t know what that means,” I say.

She turns her back to me and disappears into her bedroom. “When you destroy yourself, you don’t go away. Your places get twisted and confused and they reappear around you like monsters coming to eat you at the bottom of the sea. I just came back to salvage what I can, V.” She’s gathering her cosmetics and stuffing them into her purse. “You better get dressed,” she says.

I grab my jeans and blouse from the loveseat, pick up my serving shoes and then my black leather purse—only to realize that my hands are too full to dress myself. Maybe I really am hung over. “Did we get in a fight last night?” I ask. “Why did I sleep on the couch?”

“V, you haven’t been in my bed for over a year,” she shouts in her elevated tone, rummaging around the medicine cabinet. “I’m surprised to see you here at all. Not that it’s not a wonderful surprise. I’m so happy to see you, but I can’t enjoy it right now. I can’t hug you now. I would not be able to stop crying. We have to move. Where are you going to go?”

“I don’t know.” I’m still staring at my full hands, and put the stuff down, and start to get dressed by stepping into my favorite jeans.

“Well Jesus, maybe you should have thought about that.”

“What?”

“Vanessa, one day you won’t need to ask me before you make your own decisions.”

“We’re not so different, Jules. Maybe I’m ok. Maybe I’ve already found someplace a little safer. Maybe you are the one we need to relocate.”

The ship’s foghorn blows and we both knew what it means: seven extra minutes to get on board after the doors are “closed”—a perk of being locals. But we still have to run downstairs and cross the street and run up to the dock. It would be tight.

I put on my clothes, grab my purse and pick up her plastic bag of “random stuff.” Her travel system even has a bag that accounts for entropy. She fights her shoulders through the straps of a 65-liter backpack. “Jules, you’re in heels!” I say.

She only smiles and re-latches the top pocket lid to ensure the rope doesn’t slip.

I grab her keys from her hand and lock the door. “We’ll keep your demons locked inside,” I say.

“Oh, they already got out,” she says as she peels off her heels. She kisses my cheek and then runs down the stairs.

“Wait!” I yell, but I already know I’m not catching up with her until I get on the boat.

At the dock, the last of the line has already boarded up the aluminum plank and through a steel door into the bowels of the ship. The captain himself is out in his blue and white hat. “Hurry. You’re last!” he calls and a deckhand opens the rope to let me through.

He salutes me as I duck inside. I’m glad to be wearing my server shoes on the serrated stairs, and also worried about Jules, in her bare feet. I look for her, but she’s not

in the hallway. The captain steps onto the vessel, swinging the heavy door after him and he pushes down a lever to seal the door with a crunch.

I feel dizzy. “Did a woman just run in without shoes?” I ask him. He shakes his head and strides past me.

Did she board with the cars? I run down the ramp into the bowels of the boat—stewardesses escorting guests to their rooms. “Jules?” I call. I rush back up to the entrance door in a panic, but it’s sealed, of course, and without a window. I race up the next flight of stairs until I am above board, looking out with other passengers at the waving hands at dockside below.

And across at the next dock, there she is ready to embark: Jules—waving calmly and pressing her lips together sweetly from the deck of a lobster boat.

I put my hands out and shake my head. “What are you doing?” I yell.

She shrugs and looks backs to the traps and continues to knot the rope from her pack, connecting one trap to the next.

“Jules!” I call, but she does not look back up. The last rope is thrown back onto the ferry to a waiting deckhand. We are already drifting away from the dock.

Jules stands pigeon-toed, as always, looking small and precarious, like a prisoner heading out to the sea. She moves her foot in a circle, entwining it with the same rope connected to the traps. I look down at her bags beside my feet, with the thought of returning them somehow, throwing them to her in frustration—I don’t know—and only then does my head clear: *I’m* the one that packs a “random stuff” bag. The bag is mine. I drop to my knees and dive into it. The bag is filled with all the clothes I ever gave her—except they are new and with higher quality fabric. I pull out the diaries I gave her, ones I know she used, but these are empty and with artisan locks like none I’ve never seen. And there’s a box of jewelry, the same silver necklace and earrings I gave her but with finer

workmanship. There are even cards in the pack that I had given her for her birthday sealed in their cellophane wrappers as if I never wrote on them. I stuff it all back into the bag and dump it over the rail of the ferry so that the contents cascade into the Sound. None of it makes sense. I toss the empty bag in too. It catches the wind and finally crashes into the ferry's distant wake. I shake my hands as if to remove any remnants of her gesture. Or did she not even know what she was doing? Maybe she just couldn't take it all with her. Where is she going?

I stand immobile, confused as to exactly how I came to be standing alone again, and how she managed to slip onto another boat. How many times have I stood on the boat pleading to her? Every time I stood just like this and called to her in the same frustration. I lean over the side of the ship as it rocks and shake my head, crying. There was the time when she helped me to press the charges against Leo, even though I don't think I wanted to. I tried not to hold it against her. In that time after, she was my island. I told her that she saved me, and she told me that I saved her, and we both loved and hated each other for lying, and we both loved and hated each other for not knowing what else to do.

The ferry is drifting from port, and starts spinning to reverse ends before heading out to the ocean. The figures on shore are no longer discernible and when I turn back to the deck, I see only rows and rows of plastic benches, white and empty. The boat is entirely deserted. Am I hallucinating?

I'm rooting for you now, Jules, to save yourself. Are you rooting for me too?
Jules?

The stretches of sky and ocean are suddenly too big, and I leave them, walking down the staircase at the bow of the ship and search through a dim hallway for my cabin. I enter a large room with a stage to my left. The room is illuminated by the faint light of a single porthole and I step toward the red loveseat facing the window. By the light of the

surface, not far overhead, I watch the bubbles rise and stick to the porthole glass, and rise and stick to the traplines drifting through the water, and to the tender green stems of lotus flowers and their tiny petals blooming underwater. The bubbles let go and float to the surface, and new bubbles take their place.

I run my hand along the bone carving around my neck. Jules gave it as a gift before our travels. She said it would provide safe travel over water. But the South Pacific taught me there was more to it. It was the hook that Maui used to catch the giant fish of New Zealand and haul her up from the depths. I close my eyes. When I look up, there she is: her face floating before the porthole—just where I knew she would be. My head starts to swim. It is like waking up from a night of drinking when you sleep an unreasonably long time but when you open your eyes you don't feel sick, in fact you feel outstanding just to be alive, to have poisoned yourself purposely—although you never mean to do it *that* much. But the point is it feels like the old life and that's what it is like to see Jules. Her tight gray t-shirt moves in ripples around her. She is in such trouble.

It could be any day. But it isn't.

It is the day after some decision, some change. My breath is irregular as a sense of déjà vu comes over me. If she could just be with me for a day, and watch the way I look at her, I know she'd be cured. She'd know how I care. No, these are my crazy thoughts. I can't think them. I don't know what I should say, so I just repeat the same question as yesterday, the same as last year, the same as college:

"Where to, Jules?" I put my hand against the cold glass of the porthole.

She puts her hand on the other side and breaks eye-contact, her blue eyes drifting down.

Her mouth opens slightly. A bubble clings to her lip.

"Jules!" I say.

She looks at me. “I have no choice,” she mouths.

“You can start over,” I say.

She shakes her head. “You don’t know what I did. I deserve it.” Her eyes gaze back down.

I knock my fist against the glass, sounding dull thuds. “There’s nothing down there!” I yell. “You don’t have to go!”

She removes her hand.

She does not look up. She laughs. She laughs and swallows water. She laughs until she coughs all the bubbles from her lungs. And then she disappears from view, heavy and falling.

Jules: Lobster Pots

I open the next lobster pot. There we are as a family.

That year we left the mountains early, to save some of our mid-winter break to get an early look at two local colleges after we returned home and rested. “For Jul-i-an-na, not you,” Papa enunciated from the front seat. “Don’t worry, eighteen-year olds can make their own decisions.” It was Ryan’s own line he was feeding back to him. He was set on a year of travel from the first time he saw a *National Geographic* photo of New Zealand’s tiny blue Korora penguin. He’d have to learn to dive of course, but maybe that was the appeal—to learn to navigate someone else’s world, rather than dropping his traps into theirs.

College was one of the few topics that would make him surly. I opened my roll of Sprees and slipped that first chewy purple one into his hand. We were still allowed one package of sweets from the general store, a ritual from younger days that everyone liked but no one admitted. His own candy was already gone. I always chose the package with

most pieces, and timed them out along the eight-hour drive to give me something to do as we traveled.

“Can’t you go someplace closer?” I had asked him.

My mother turned around from the passenger seat. “You know, there are some great colleges on Long Island.”

Ryan smiled and I knew that we had only solidified his desire to go. He worked on Uncle Louie’s lobster boat every day it went out that summer, planning where the money would take him.

Ryan watched the river’s stillness through the window. When I was five, I slipped into that rushing river in my dress, just behind the general store. I couldn’t swim at the time. When I surfaced, he was beside me, pushing me back toward the rocks as I doggie-paddled, and tried not to choke on water, and then he guided me up onto the rock. I stood dripping onto its surface, soaked and confused, gasping for air. People clapped for him from the back deck. I was mortified, but too stunned to cry.

The next time we’d be back up here, it would be summer and Ryan and I could swim in the river one more time before he went away. I assumed I could convince him off that boat for a long weekend, although I knew he wanted the money. Ryan ate the Spree without moving his eyes from the road, his jaw muscular and defined, but his face still boyish and vulnerable.

We weaved down the dirt roads of our snowy peak, driving up and down rolling passes as the chain links on the back wheels of the station wagon vacillated between a clinking rhythm and the roar of snow they shot under the car’s wheel wells. By this time of year the sound of the river under the ice had stopped entirely.

He swallowed and put out a hand for another candy. I placed the next Spree in his hand, even though he had nothing left to trade for it. I usually waited for that first covered

bridge to eat my first piece of candy, and by this point in the drive was on my third of fourth taste. I unrolled the next piece and put it in my mouth. It exploded with saliva as I started to chew. I threw a deck of cards at him. It hit the door and fell into his lap. He slid the cards out of the pack and started shuffling. I smiled, but at the same time I wanted to cry. I knew I couldn't keep him forever.

The snow-covered maples and spruce and birch became less visible as the roads became wider, and the carbon-stained snow caked up behind our tires until night fell, and at some point between naps the white disappeared. When the East River finally came back into view, I ate my last piece, a green one, stinging my mouth with its bitterness from hundreds of feet up on the Throgs Neck. I looked through the lights of the Whitestone to the right framing mid-town Manhattan in its tent-like cables. My stomach burned. I didn't want us to be back so soon.

Papa always made sure we arrived late, so the traffic was less from the Cross Island to the Northern State. We followed it to the end and picked our way back north and toward the shore, where the roads again became smaller, and even the street lamps disappeared.

We were back.

I sat at the old wooden table in the kitchen with my exhausted but smiling mother doting on me. "Just sit," she said, and poured me a glass of milk while Papa and Ryan carried the bags in from the car and one after the next and planted them in our rooms.

"Remember this," my mother rubbed my head and sat down across from me. "Remember when we were just back from the mountains and I poured you a glass of milk." She just smiled and watched me drink.

I assumed she knew something that I would learn later. I didn't question her. I didn't realize that the familiar would not always be so comforting, that the ordinary could unravel so completely.

Something catches between my lips and I pull out a short piece of purple frayed thread. It must have been in the glass all along, resting at the bottom. I lay it on the table, spreading it flat, but it arches and bends itself into a wave—a thing already in motion.

* * *

The wake of the ferry settles as the boat disappears from view. I open the next lobster pot as we drift down through the Sound to the bottom. Ryan appears off in the distance, as he was at eighteen, dropping traps off the end of a boat in the late afternoon summer sun like he's still there. Like he's been doing the same circuit ever since—or I have. They're heading to the next buoy.

I never understood how they could tell which were their buoys and which belonged to other lobstermen. And even if the buoy did have a certain color or shape, how did they get from one to the next? Did they have navigation? Or did they develop a sense for direction, even in open water? Did they occasionally miss a trap? If they did, how much time had to pass for the lobster to starve to death? Would new lobster just keep coming into the trap? I knew that they were not above eating each other. Maybe the ones that arrived late to the forgotten traps fed on the starving and weak ones. Probably. Who knows though. After the accident I stopped asking about lobster, and I never ate one again.

I can see Ryan for the first time in forever, but he still feels familiar. I don't remember him being so strong. His muscles ripple in a red tank top, pulling on his cigarette in between dropping those heavy metal cages covered in barnacles and seaweed. It gets cold out on the water a little earlier in late summer, and he's been standing there a

while holding onto a rail, waiting for Uncle Louie to steer the boat to the next buoy. Ryan stamps out his cigarette and rubs his arm. He's getting cold, and walks down below into the cabin and grabs his checkered flannel. That was the one he wore the most, sun-faded but still warm.

My heart dips as I watch him get ready to lift the next trap, or the pot as they call it. I wish I didn't know what they were called. Now I know what I am watching.

* * *

The boat engine was cut and they coasted up to the buoy. He grabbed it and fished the chain out of the water and dragged it to the crank mounted on the boat. He ratcheted the pot up one turn at a time, bent over and slowed only slightly as the weight of the day began to make inroads on his tired body. He reached down to the trap and now with the help of the Uncle Louie, it crashed onto the deck sloshing green water across the deck's worn orange paint.

Uncle Louie put his hands on his hips and pointed at the blue lobster before Ryan could open the pot. "That's something you don't see every day."

Ryan smiled, but with less excitement than I expected. He was just looking to finish up and get back to the dock.

They pulled the lobster out and put rubber bands on their claws so that they did not maul each other further. Several were already missing half an antenna, and one, a leg. They saved the blue one for last—some kind of ritual.

"Will someone eat that?" he asked.

"Boil him and he'll turn red like the rest of 'em." Uncle Louie grabbed the blue by the back and walked back to the tank.

Ryan baited the pot and closed the door. They set the pot lines for shooting, and Uncle Louie moved to the bow and pushed the throttle to full.

Ryan threw the first pot off the stern and watched as the loops of line connecting it to the second raced to a straight line and shot it clear of the wake into the deep sea, and then the second and then the third, and he watched to make sure the line did not snag.

What was he thinking as he looked back to Louie? As his foot lifted just three inches as a loop of rope slapped under it? Was he thinking about the blue lobster? Contemplating the next catch? Or was his mind drifting in a moment where exhaustion first started to creep in, unchecked? Was he dreaming of diving with the blue penguin?

The rope wrapped around his ankle in an instant, the weight of the pots pulling him after them, then dragging him under the sea. In a flash of sun on a cresting wave, he was gone. He was traveling down through water with great speed, his breath ripped out of his lungs before he fully realized what was happening.

Uncle Louie understood the irregularity of the rhythms, the difference between the ricochet of a wooden pot, and the echo of an elbow on the deck, and he turned around to see Ryan flying through the air. Ten yards beyond the bow, his arms were still outstretched, his fingers in their yellow gloves, still reaching. Uncle Louie cut the engine as Ryan crashed into the water, followed by the next pot, and then another as the boat coasted forward. Uncle Louie rushed back, his eyes searching helplessly, as the pots sank with vigor and speed, hoping that Ryan would un-entwine himself and emerge. It was a long way down to Ryan already, the line just to get to him was seven pots too long.

Louie pulled off his flannel, kicked off his shoes, and dove. Even as he traveled along the line, new pots shot in behind him, until all twelve were sinking behind him. He knew he'd never match the speed of the descending trap, much less catch it, but what would he tell his brother? What would he tell my mom, if he didn't try? That he stood there and watched the rope unravel? And then cranked up our lifeless blue boy?

* * *

Louie never let anyone else work the bow of the boat while shooting pots. He took the job himself, but he also took to drinking. The fact that our drunk uncle survived out there for another twenty years, was only further proof of how unfair Ryan's death was. I follow the rope down through the algae and seaweed until we finally settle on the sea floor. I look into a trap at the bottom. I throw open the door. There are no lobsters, only their shells, and if there are blue ones, I can't tell—they're covered in slime and rolling back and forth in the drift.

Who is setting these pots and leaving the lobsters to their fate?

I turn the pot upside down and shake out their remains, and there at the bottom is me—limp and unresponsive, being pulled by a man from a red bathtub.

I look back to the surface, from the bottom of the Sound. Along the abandoned ropes, a tangle of lotus flower stalks grows toward, but never reaches, the surface.

Jules: Lotuses

It all started in the rain outside a university bar with the simple desire to finish my cigarette.

I had taken Amtrak all the way down to UVA to surprise Sorintino. He finally got the tenure he was promised in New York, even if he had to move all the way down to Virginia to get it. It was a big deal for him and I wouldn't ask him to put off the celebration. On the phone he mentioned heading to the same trendy bar he had taken me on my last visit. The expectation was that I would be down *after* my work-week in New York. He didn't know I was on the train, but it was my birthday and I was feeling impulsive. I took him at his word that he badly wanted to celebrate it with me. Girl's night out would have been fun, but I wanted to see the look on his face when I showed up

unannounced at his Friday spot. If he really knew me, he would have expected it. And if I really knew him, I would have expected the grad student that was on his arm.

He was a man, who until recently, was more consumed with beakers than blowjobs. I guess I changed that. I started bringing him to clubs, helping him with his wardrobe. I had gone too far. I had changed him into a man, and now he was acting like one.

“Really?” I asked. “Have a little class, Sorintino,” and I walked out the door and extracted a cigarette.

He must have said something to them, and then followed me, but I stopped him half-way through the polished wooden door, my finger near his chest but not touching it.

“I need a moment,” I said and hardened my gaze without breaking eye contact. I flipped my Zippo open and lit my smoke. He started to speak and stopped. Raised a hand and stopped.

“Don’t go anywhere,” he said.

“Promise,” I said blowing smoke into the air. “After all, it’s my birthday, so we should celebrate.”

He turned on his heel as the door swung shut behind him. I watched as exhale after exhale of smoke dissipated into the dusk sky. By the time I came back to myself, my thin blouse, the pattern of blue and purple irises, had soaked through with rain, sticking to every curve of my body. I looked down at the blackened end of the filter, but couldn’t remember smoking it that long. And when did it start raining?

My hair was wet. Surely my mascara was all over my face. I couldn’t party now looking like this, and laugh it all off with the rest of the guys, ribbing Sorintino until the bitch left. It would be nice to walk Sorintino home, to wait until the moment he stammered his apology, to hear him say it, that he’d take me over anyone—and he would

say it—and then I would dump him on the spot, and get back on the train. But no matter how sharp my words, I couldn't overcome the soaked blouse or the matted hair; I'd come across as unglued. I didn't do "unglued."

I walked back inside and simply asked him for a key to his house. He pressed his lips together as I held out my dripping hand.

"Let me talk to you outside," he said, but I shook my head no. Studying me, he stuffed his right hand into the pocket of his slacks, pulled out his keychain, and unthreaded the brass house key from the rest. "Please stay," he said. "I'll sleep on the couch." He offered me his umbrella, but I declined.

I walked along the street through the rain toward his house, past restaurants with white lights threaded along their front porches, past glass condos with the windows wide open as the college students played beer pong or milled about with their Solo cups on balconies. Plan B. You were always my plan B anyway, Sorintino. You were the perfect patch on a monstrous dam. But patches never hold. Not forever.

* * *

The feeling of last week's attack took hold of me. It had never gone away. I'd just left for work, slowing at an Italian restaurant in the Village where Vanessa and I had dinner once. I stopped with the others pointing and looked south—smoke was pouring from the towers. White stars were born into my vision, stars that my mind tracked as fractal patterns spiraling around me. A man stood in front of his flower shop handing out blue daisies, asking us to pray. In my memory, the buildings fell right then. First one, then the next. The people around me began screaming as the ground shook, reaching for anything bolted down or with a foundation—a bench, the side of a building—to try to regain their footing, but even bolts and foundations dislodged from the earth. Buildings snapped like trees and buttressed one another as cobblestones were shaken from their places in the

road, and then everything fell toward the depression created by the collapse of the financial district—all of us unmoored and flying after them.

Since Vanessa and I had both returned to the city, each of us knew we would do lunch any day. I was so sure of it that I never made the plan. But when the towers fell, I saw the folly. I knew she worked there, and I was sure she was inside as I watched them fall. I was convinced I could make her form out among the dots I saw falling. I'd later confirm that they really were people, jumping. Were you a jumper? Our last conversation would always be on that other island on the far side of the world.

"Make sure you retrieve your bags in Fiji, this time," she reminded me.

"If they would just let me hold onto them," I replied, "I would never forget." I fidgeted with the bone carving around her neck and kissed her on the lips. "Let's get together when you get back," I said.

The folly of our lack of contact came to me early that day—but early was still too late.

My psychologist said I demonstrated a penchant for rising too high and falling too low, even before the tragedy, so I was already testing a new approach to life. More quiet. Less abrupt changes. No impulsive shopping expeditions.

Sorintino spoke to me nightly during that time, asking about my day. If I had taken my walk. What I had eaten. I was a woman to him only in bed, and a child he had to take care of the rest of the time. I was ok with it. I thought it meant that he knew me, or that Ryan was speaking through him. But taking care of someone was not the same as caring for them. I had become so deranged. I was planning to move down to this Virginia college town next spring.

Now in the soaked blouse, I wondered how I would ever stop falling. My feet beat solid against pavement, and the rain filled the remaining gaps. How does one greet silence when it finally arrives? Do you let it embrace you, even if it means suffocation? I was playing it coy, knowing that it was waiting for me, but what it would feel like when it enveloped me, I couldn't say. I trampled the rain-fallen hyacinth flowers under the lights of the university sidewalk. My world was suspended. There was a freedom here. His cheating had saved me from a long and horrible married life.

I walked through the university and passed a group of frat guys, one blond boy whispering to his buddy as they both turned to stare at my tits, front and center in the blouse suctioned to them. I boiled over, saying something about his pencil-dick, sorority-drugging desperation, and his future khaki-wearing country-club social life—when he'd finally give up on appearances and blow whatever CEO next walked into the john in hope that he would bestow a proper salary on him that would keep his fat wife shopping. I was out of breath. The blond boy held his hands up, then beginning to turn away, he said, "I was only saying . . ."

"Say it then," I commanded.

His friends put their hands in their pockets. Blond Boy turned back to me. "Aren't you Professor Sorintino's wife?"

My stomach dropped. I twisted my face into a sneer but couldn't quite get there without my lower lip trembling. "Don't worry about it," I said and put my head down. I turned and kept walking. I passed the college couples waiting out the rain under the eaves, giggling under umbrellas as if this were the opening to a fucking musical. They laughed now, but couldn't see their future selves looking back at them like I could.

Behind them, over their heads, I saw several rooms light up in the dorm building, as if their future selves gazed down, yelling to catch their attention. Some rooms were of

an office building—they put down the phones or stepped away from their computers, and walked to the window. The nurse put down his clipboard, the teacher her PowerPoint clicker, the server her tray. I saw their mouths' moving, but we couldn't hear what they had to say. How do you force yourself to change course? I knew what I would say to my past self: This life is built on something awful, on something grotesque and monstrous, on something needy and manipulative that will never be satisfied. You will want the next thing and then the next. The disappointment will never end. I know. I walked past the building. I already know.

To think, in ten years most of the women would have their ring, their baby, their extra ten pounds, having achieved an idea of happiness, only to realize it was just an idea, while their husbands searched mercilessly for theirs—some ego-pumping bitch to screw at odd hours no doubt. One that could be sold as “meetings” or “a drink with the boys.” Sorantino's lies were all coming back to me. All the while the women who married well, would hire nannies and pursue Bikram yoga, or meet friends for vine-ripened, organic, color-coordinated low-carb meals, guaranteed to chase the doldrums away, and they'd tell each other that they *did* it—they *have* it—they *really* have everything—because what else could there be?

This night was my saving grace. I could have been them. Thank God, I would never live in those rooms. But I also missed that I *was* them: or I was their ghost, their shell, their negation. I had no better room to step into. There was a version of me too stepping to the edge by the gutter to retrieve something. What was I looking for?

For a moment, I thought I caught Vanessa's face looking out the top story of the dorm's pane glass window, standing up from her seat. Her eyes hit me for just a moment as I fell away into the white noise of the storm. I focused on relocating my feet, reconnecting my own steps to the sounds of splashing water. It was all I could do.

I arrived at Sorintino's and paused, facing my reflection in the foyer window of his home. My form was enclosed in a halo of water. What was left had come unglued.

I look at the image again now from behind her shoulder. At first, it's unclear, faint, overcome by the rain. But then it turns into a mirror—too well-lit, and I see my face blackened from the mascara, the whites of my eyes spider-webbed red with bloodshot—I might still be alive, yet I look more like a ghost than I do now.

My hair was plastered against my jaw line and neck. The key slid perfectly into the lock, and a gust of wind helped swing the door open. I turned on the bathtub. Took out a bottle of vodka, poured myself a glass, and then dumped it down my throat, then another. It felt right. Like I was allowing the rain to run all the way through me. Because what's the difference between a person and the elements really? This hairy bag of skin, a grotesque mutation of particles fused in a sun.

I once thought that life would eventually go in a way that favored me. I expected to have my lows along the way, but now they felt unchangeable. Life was supposed to surprise me at every turn and its delights were supposed to flower in ways I could never imagine. But if I was honest—and I was now finally being honest—I imagined this all along.

Why live out false ends, the constant disappointment of a misguided girl's broken wishes? Whoever she had been was wrong. None of this was sustainable. Why patch over nightmares with the fantasies of childhood? The losses were more real. I didn't just lose Ryan one time. I lost him again and again. Every day I woke up excited, ready to run into his room, but before I stood up it hit me that he was gone. I saw him struggling to come back to me everywhere—his voice overheard in a stranger's, or a glimmer of his face in an advertisement. Each moment of excitement became one of disenchantment. Of despair. This world that promises so much, was only setting me up to take it all away.

I took one more look out at the world through the kitchen window. The whole world was out at their Friday parties. The flowers in the garden bent their spring heads to the earth under the rain. Weighed down. Defeated. I could see every drop of rain falling on the kitchen window. As I focused on them, they blotted out everything. I watched the drops adhere, and as they, one by one, slipped down the glass. I'm sorry I couldn't keep us together, Ryan. V, I'm sorry I didn't call you for breakfast.

I shut the water off and placed the razor on the side of the tub. They say at moments like these people think about who will find the body. I thought only of my body as something already gone. Like I had spent my whole life telling a story, and had simply come to the last lines:

I lowered a body into water. Guided by fingers, a blade trolled across someone else's wrists, ploughing furrows. From the bottom of the tub, lotus stalks emerged, growing upward. In blooms of red, they opened under the surface and grew, distinct for a second from the water. Before they could surface, I swam among them, and with the slump of a body, we dissipated into cursive lines with the push of a current.

And then: I am back on the traplines, heading to the same destinations, again and again. I carry the lotuses against my chest, looking for someone worth giving them to. We travel together. We give ourselves to water. We meet the same people in new cages, walking in and out of their old doors.

Jules: Caught

I look down three stories from the Bio 111 open window and even though my legs are inside on the classroom floor, the vertigo hits hard. I lean back into the brick building, just enough so that my forearms feel more stable on the windowsill, and to keep my skirt from hiking up so high. I turn my head to see Professor Sorentino walking between lab

groups. I catch him looking over. He angles his head askance, his palms itching to turn upward in question. The students are all busy in their corners of the lab, huddled around their thistle tubes filled with Karo syrup. I'm in the mood for something sweet.

"Is it time to measure the diffusion again?" I smile and shrug, so he knows I'm on my way back. But first, I extend my contraption back out of the window—a plastic straw pulled through and taped down to a tongue depressor, reinforced by a rubber band—and release it. It drops rapidly at first but then catches the air as it begins to dart left and right as it helicopters down. I squeal and turn in a hurry and almost take myself out on Leo's shoulder.

"Whoa-whoa-whoa, lil' sister," he says. "Don't hurt yourself," as I navigate the rest of the lab tables with ease and am out the door. I might still catch it before it hits the ground. I allow myself another shriek of joy as Sorintino watches me go.

As soon as I step into the stairwell, time seems to slow and I think Polaroid, which is strange because I haven't taken pictures since high school, under the high school football stands during the Saturday games, photographing feet as they shuffled between plays, as they stomped out a metal bang, bang, bang-bang to go with lousy horn music, the cheers, then the sounds of feet as some stood—one here and one there—and then all of them at once when a back broke free along the sideline, that horrible creak as they all stood in unison and cheered.

I keep running down the stairs.

Was it my footsteps that triggered the memory? Or was it something else? Was it because this was one of those make-a-perfect-moments? I would rush through the door, and I *would* catch the device in my hand. I would yell and feign sheepishness as I returned to class. But I would have caught it. It would be mine. One more stairway to go.

I rush out of the peeling green door too late—it's on the grass, the rubber band detached and the tongue depressor half-torn from the straw.

I catch my breath as I fall into a heavy walk. Damn centripetal force. I'll tell Sorintino it's a doozy. He'll confirm the validity of my experiment and tell me to please rejoin the class. I squat at the edge of the brick walk and extract the flying device gingerly from the grass, holding it at a distance like it's a damaged insect. Before I can stand, I hear her boots, and swing my head toward the stranger. What a freak I must look like in this moment.

She smiles shyly but with assurance while walking toward me, a backpack over one shoulder and those super-cool knitted arm warmers that I should compliment. A ponytail tells me she doesn't need to try too hard, but the way it is combed together without strays, and her eyeliner, with just a hint of purple in the black, shows me that she cares. There's a confidence to her that makes me embarrassed.

Looking at her now, stepping back from the trap for a moment, I realize she had lost that assurance by the time we started dating.

I stand up and brush my jeans off, even though I wasn't kneeling, and hold the contraption by my side—as normally as one can hold such a thing. I smile back at her and look away for just a moment as I move to the side. Her blue eyes are devastating in their kindness and in their intensity.

“Hi,” I say a little more accusingly than I intended. She is nearly past me, but stops.

“Hi,” she says turning on her heel, “are there faculty offices in this building?”

“For the sciences,” I say.

“Oh good,” she says still looking right at me. She extends her right hand. “I'm Vanessa.”

“Jules,” I say shaking her hand. My fingertips move under her arm warmer, finding a warm cocoon.

“Oh, careful,” she says as I pull away. “I think I caught you.”

My hand is already back at my side when I see a long gray string pulling out of her wrist. His palm is open and still. I extend my fingers and present my hand as if for a manicure. The string is entwined with my ring, coiled up with the silver serpent that envelops half my forefinger.

“Sorry,” I say looking up from my hand. “She’s in a playful mood today.”

Vanessa looks at my ring, and when she looks back at me, she smiles again.

Jules: Y2K

I roll up from the blanket and kiss Vanessa’s shoulder through her hoodie. She sits, arms over knees, like hundreds of others, exhausted, and staring into the dark ocean. It’s the first day of the new millennium, and from what I can tell, it’s going to be as boring as the last one thousand years. I slide behind her and wrap my torso around her hips. “Wake me when the children row in,” I say. The Maori oarsmen will appear from the open sea right at sunrise in their traditional boat, these men symbolic of the children of Ranginui, bursting out of the light as time begins again with the first light of the new millennium. As if it ever stopped.

V presented me with two tickets at the end of junior year, explained we had a year to plan, to save, said I owed it to myself to swim with dolphins in Milford Sound. New Zealand didn’t owe me though. I said yes because I owed it to Ryan, and I owed it to myself not to stay past the summer in my parent’s house, Ryan’s bedroom always next door. And I said yes to V because it was so brave of her to move forward from everything she had been through in college.

For the last four months, I rode every water taxi I came across, hoping I'd see a little blue penguin pop up out of the waves and I'd know that he was watching out for me. Feeling would come flooding back to me and I'd know how to live a life with meaning. But Ryan never would have come to this New Year's celebration, to any kind of mass gathering. He'd be up on a mountain, or moving between islands on a boat, diving at all the hot spots. I still couldn't stop thinking about him every day. I was experiencing this for both of us, bringing him here through my thoughts. But the practice just kept reminding me that my life would never be whole.

He wouldn't have driven close to three hundred miles just to be closer to the International Date Line, when we had the sleepy beach-town bonfires of the Coromandel Peninsula, and the cozy backpackers right on the shore. Wouldn't have chosen to stand in a line of tourists at Pizza Hut, or pay for a coveted bunk for a night, just to sleep through the morning once the party was over. The boy who would sneak out as young as thirteen to sleep at the cove with his friends—he would laugh at that. Not to mention the pending drive all the way back up to Auckland for our flight. We had obviously spent all our brainpower on last night's plans. There wasn't much planning for today. I imagine myself in the backseat of the car with Ryan, the cards on his lap. He looks at me expectantly. I guess now we just go home.

V and I could make the flight in time, and that's all we'd considered. But now I realize what six hours of driving will be like later today. What were we thinking? All this to be "the first to see the sun." But that catchy slogan was already turning rancid like the dregs of wine in my stomach. I felt used.

There was no technological crash like I was secretly hoping for. Society isn't going to start over. I'm not going to be stranded here and force immigration to extend my visa. I haven't seen a little blue penguin despite my best efforts, and now the boat

ceremony is all that we have left before dragging our monster duffels into Auckland International, and our 65-liter backpacks swaying higher than our heads. My remaining hope for the night, no for the last six months of travel, is just for a damn boat to appear on the horizon—so I might feel something, and then go and get some rest.

To finish the trip, I had maxed out my credit cards—so a serious job search awaited me once the plane landed in New York. I didn't save for the trip here as much as I should have. I reach toward my legs and better cover myself in the blanket that envelops V and I. The wind still sneaks between us. She moves closer, closing the gaps.

"Are they here?" I mumble.

"Not yet," she says, still watching the water.

At midnight, Y2K was going to wipe out the power grid. Everyone was going to cheer, until the reality became immediate and stark. We were going to have to account for a massive lifestyle change and unexpected obstacles. Airplanes would fall from the sky. New York and the rest of the major cities would go black. We would have to cooperate with strangers just to find food. We would have to share whatever we found, because that's just what people have to do in times like those. But it never came. People just kept drinking.

I pull a pack of smokes out of my pocket and reach up as V hands me hers to light it off. Is my world such a disaster that I want us all to live in a mess of uncertainty? It would seem so.

"V," I said, "Are you really looking for the boat out there?"

Vanessa: First Light

I push my bare feet into the New Zealand sand and stare out across the gray water. I want it to be blue. I want it to be warmer. But it is only five am, and there is still forty-five

minutes left before the first light of the new millennium. The music is over for now as the stage behind us preps for the grand finale. I smoke with my knees held close, sitting mostly on the blanket, and then snuff it out in the sand, careful not to wake her at my shoulder.

I'm going to quit smoking. My therapist back in New York said the habit was a byproduct of my father's heart attack. She called it "my trauma." She thinks that's why I started smoking sophomore year, and that my anger at losing him just took a while to show. I never corrected her about why my sophomore grades took a nosedive. I never told her about Leo.

The local papers got a hold of the story and reported he was forced to sit out the lacrosse season. I was worried about how I would be perceived, about the lies he would tell when we went to trial, and how I would counter them. By the time he dropped out of school that year, I had stopped eating, and then I dropped the charges entirely.

"People already know about him," I told Jules. "That's all that matters anyway," and eventually she let it go too.

When I was finally ready to speak to my therapist about it, Leo was murdered outside a bar. His death was horrible, and not poetic at all, and just like that he was gone. We found out through the school newspaper. As Jules read the obit to me, she kept pausing to watch my face, to see my reaction.

"No mention that he was a rapist," she muttered.

"Jules," I said, "stop. He's dead."

At first I was worried that the pursuit of legal action had somehow caused it—that I had asked the world for vengeance and it had delivered. I never wished that he would die. Did I?

I would never get to deliver the calm monologue I had been rehearsing for the next time I saw him at the Forest Dhamma Center. I would close by telling him the weight of his actions was his to carry, not mine, and then I would start living my life as someone lighter.

I replay the imagined conversation with him in my mind, again, the one I could never have with him, as I watch the sea. By the time Jules asks me what I am thinking, I can only shrug. I feel numb and sad. Not for him, but for me. And that's where it leaves me now just like it left me back then in college—without a way forward.

Jules had trashed the paper after reading the obit and leaned against me on the couch. "I wouldn't blame you if you were happy deep down. I'm not happy. I'm just saying, I wouldn't blame you." I looked off to the room's furthest wall as I let her hair fall through my fingers as she kissed my cheek.

We went back and forth that way. I was numb while she would be finding parties or art openings, frequenting bowling nights and community dinners, and then she would crash and become downright depressive, holing up for days crying over dumb romance movies. She would remain unreachable until finally indulging in a day of the old Star Wars films—still folded up in the nook of her couch in her sweats, but on her way back.

She was a different person during those brief spells, and they worried me, but mostly she was the star any roomful of people rotated around. Wine in hand, she would call on me the instant I started receding into myself, calling for my story about that eccentric grocery bagger or to report about some psychological anomaly I had studied. It was always unforced, placing me on a pedestal that her audience accepted with blind faith. But really, the light was hers. I liked to think I stabilized it. She was one of those mad ones in that Kerouac quote she repeated, no shouted—mad to live, mad about

everything, burning like a fabulous roman candle that bursts in the sky and everyone says “Oh!”—or something like that.

No one talks about the cold cinders that are left to plummet back to the earth.

I look around at pockets of people spaced out on blankets, passed out and slumping into one another. Now that the party is over and we have all come down, all we have left to do is wait in silence. It is still mostly dark on the beach, but I can see figures hunched and cold through the light of a few candles and the flashlights of those rummaging through packs. Are all of us *always* looking for something? They look heavy, stripped down, waiting for this night to end.

I don’t have a plan, but I can’t see myself packing up and leaving New Zealand just yet. I don’t have a reason to stay, but then, I don’t have a reason to go back. So why not? I could go back to Ohau in the Southern Alps and wait tables and talk to travelers while I get on my feet—but the visa. I could go to graduate school—there was that professor at Canterbury. She was a former colleague of my father, doing me a favor and giving me a tour, but we took a liking to one another over lunch and she offered to help me find a place at the grad school if I had a change of heart.

There is Jules of course, but she always said she’d be my bridge. She’d get me back to being ok, to feeling strong and independent. If she was my support before, it’s changed now. I need to go and *be* those things. There is a buzz of excitement in my stomach now. Maybe I could actually do it. The South Island would be a good place to be poor, to start again from nothing.

Jules would move to the city anyway. She had been dropping hints about this, trying to get me to bite on bottle service and the clubs, museums and theater, the food and the energy. I was always certain I would let her leave me before I made my own decision. I assumed one of her boy-flings would turn serious, and we’d call our college years

together a stage we went through. But maybe she already *has* seen me through the worst of it like she always said she would.

I could stay with my mother and accept the New York island as some type of lingering trauma I inhabit. And listlessly at that, with odd jobs and dissatisfaction, and Mom's net to make sure I never slip back. But the dread, the crippling inaction of The Island, and the lingering memory of my father in the house. I need to stay here. I need to push forward.

I open my purse and pull out a thin half-size notebook. It will be hard for Jules to understand my staying, but then such decisions are hard to explain. I fill up both sides of the sheet, and as I finish I realize more light is coming through the clouds. I can see my writing. The loops are clear and composed within the unlined page.

The sunrise has come and gone without a stirring. A cloudy early morning has already begun. I look up for the boat and realize it never came, and the famous opera star and the chorus—they missed their cue and haven't yet taken to the stage. I tear the paper from the binding and hold it before me. In the breeze, a thread from my hand warmers brushes against it. This old and overused pair with too many holes, useless for warmth now. I pluck at the thread, remembering Jules' playful words at our first meeting as her ring hooked the string.

I roll my paper into a tube and wind the thread around the middle. It is lighter than I expect—as if endings only come in chains or heavy metal cages—and it slides smoothly into Jules' pocket under the blanket. She stirs and picks her head up for a kiss. She'll understand.

At the airport later tonight, she'll tell me I am brave, with tears in her eyes and deliver her "long-planned" fantastic adventure that she'll actually make up on the spot. Then she'll sit down on the plane and wave to me from a window, pretending to be afraid

with some goofy face, miming a soaring plane with her palm, coursing it along the window only to suddenly nosedive and burst into flames—she'll use both hands for that part—and then laugh uncontrollably as the real plane makes its pivot. She'll turn to me in that moment and I'll see the real her, exposed for just an instant.

She'll wait until she is airborne, until her stomach settles. She'll wait for that moment when she feels in between, neither coming nor going, and helplessly alone in that stale air—when there is nothing at all worth holding. That's when she'll open the letter and read.

1 January 2000

Dear Jules, this might be my first love letter to you. This could also be my farewell. But it might just be a note to myself, a reminder of still greater distances and harder journeys that roll endless as cloud vapor tossed by wind, heavy with age, rising from oceans to once again dance in form and in the collisions and separations that keep coming, not in just this lifetime, but those many to come.

Don't worry, Dear One. If you can't call me, I will have to live with it. I know you don't hate me. We will continue to live with our choices. Don't try to trace this to some first wound. The time when our confusion began will not be found, even if their faces come back to us—this moment need not be the re-dredging of that terror. We were always alone, but we never have to be lonely.

Becoming. Memory. Among their tangle, I imagine endless stories I will never retrieve. Are we trying to recover ourselves? Or recover from ourselves?

Even before I clung to you, you made sure I knew we would need to let go. It would be a comfort if one day our stories agreed, if on nothing else than on their unraveling. For I can tell you only about the ends, ends that I can't let end. Ends I only

know how to weave into new beginnings. Ends. So many, they are beginning to look the same.

I will not forget you as I go, although you will forget yourself before too long. Becoming. Memory. Within this tangle, there are stories that claim me. Of any true end, I can't say. I can only try a new direction. I am only willing to try. Imagine dropping one identity as we will drop our story. Or our last letters, rearranging on a page.

I can see you already back in New York, moving constantly between buildings and rooms, streets and subways. You're a star there surrounded by stars. You are circling one another, and dancing. New York, where the highs are so much higher, and the lows . . . well, I don't know if anyone can keep you from the lows.

Jules wiggles her body more deeply into the sand. "Is it time yet?"

"Not yet," I say and lean back onto my hands.

She moans. "Tell me when, ok?"

"Ok," I say. "I will."

I unbury my feet and stretch them, the horizon visible between my toes. The clouds block the sun's location, but it must be somewhere over the water. We had imagined we would have to cover our eyes at the first light, as it overwhelmed us, that it would bounce off the waves in the distance and then illuminate the beach, as the boat was paddled in from the horizon. Instead of our dramatic moment, we have just a dull and sleepy world coming back into focus. Jules' flight home all seems a very long way from here.

The mic crackles and the lethargic people spread out on blankets. They will their heads to turn away from the ocean and back toward the stage. The PA announcer's voice is garbled and apologetic. I can see her moving her arms.

“What did she say V?” Jules asks me.

I look over my shoulder as she lays her head back down. “I think the boat is lost. Or delayed or something. Or technical difficulties. I can’t make it all out,” I say, my voice hoarse. “Sleep. There’s still time.”

Others stand and pack their backpacks and shoulder bags as a lone singer comes up to the mic. Apparently, in our new world the boat will come somewhat after the beginning of all things. In the meantime, they offer us some of the music they had planned for later. Sure, why wait? But if they thought the singer would keep people sated, mostly they are wrong. It is a mass exodus by the time she even begins her rhythmic Maori words, each line like a stone, skipping along, until it finally loses momentum and slips under. Her voice starts low and she lets the words build and bloom in a higher pitch with the end of each verse. I can’t believe that the people are walking away. Just sit, I want to say. Sit for a moment and listen.

“Ugh, I can’t understand her,” Jules complains. “It sounds beautiful though.”

I leaf through the program, as Jules presses against me. “There,” I point.

The singer continues, in a cappella, a silhouette on stage.

They are agitated
the waters of Waiapu,
But when you cross over girl
they will be calm.

Oh girl
return to me,
I could die
of love for you.

I have written my letter
I have sent my ring,

so your people can see
how troubled I am.

My pen is shattered,
my paper is spent
But my love
is still steadfast.

My love will never
be dried by the sun,
It will be forever moistened
by my tears.

Oh girl
return to me
I could die
of love for you

I could die
of love

“I could die of love,” Jules reads, clutching my sweatshirt tight in both fists.

“I know,” I say, unhooking a hand from me. “I know.”

I will be back in New York within the year, but will never again live on Long Island. I will take the first job I can find serving at Windows in the towers, and start saving for the next departure.

Kairos: New Yorkers

We could taste metal for days afterward. It was a cloud from chemical and fire, airborne debris and noxious vapor. Sometimes visible and sometimes not, the collapse hovered

over us. We breathed the devastation and loss into our core. We were one in our mortality, and we also remembered that however long we had forgotten this, we always were.

For the witnesses, we at least knew what the end would smell like when it came back, and we were damn sure it would go away and come back—that this was just the start of something even bigger. We also knew how the cadence of people’s voices would change when it came back. We knew how the first shock felt in the gut, and the second, and the third. It might not have been the end of our society, but it was close enough, and we now knew what disaster smelt like, how it would linger with us, and how one day—whether it be in a global or private way—we would have to step through our windows too, like those jumpers holding hands and falling after their decision between flames and freefall had been made.

Each jet vanished into their own reflections, and were replaced by fireballs. Then the collapse, and finally the clouds, and then the cloud-people wandering their new land of white dust. We had come to work that day from our Manhattan apartments, from town homes in the boroughs, or from an hour away: out east on The Island, to the west from Jersey, or up north—what the “real” New Yorkers called “Up-State.”

We called our loved ones when the first plane hit and said we were ok, or we called them when we got out, when we thought we were maybe, probably going to be, ok. Or we never called at all. Or we walked from the business district across the Brooklyn Bridge after the collapse, or walked north toward our home, only to then sit down inexplicably at some other familiar bar and continue to watch the scene on TV and drink, even though it was all right down the street. We wondered why the cell phones were dead, if we were still under attack. We had a second drink and tried to remember what we had actually witnessed at the scene and what we had only watched on the screen.

Had we really seen the jumpers, and the bodies and broken glass at the bottom as we exited the then intact south tower, the police shuffling us along, telling us, “Don’t look.”

Of course we looked.

The people, we thought, the people, and heard estimates of close to fifty thousand of them who worked there every day, and three times the number in daily visitors, and more underground. Who knows? they said. Who knows the numbers. We imagined them together and falling. We dialed numbers that went directly to voicemail. We watched glass and steel and concrete in their most grand combinations return spectacularly to breakability and impermanence, again and again, over and over.

We counted the missing, the friends we hadn’t heard from, and especially those with a family member they were desperately trying to track down. We watched the president from the bar by the LIRR. We found him wooden and uncertain, or we found him too certain. We heard him encourage our resolve, or our quiet anger, or his proclamation that we lacked fear in the face of the evil. But we feared. Some found him calm, like a kind parent, and some heard in his closing: “God bless America,” a stark declaration of war.

On The Island we sifted through the last days of summer. We heard confirmation about our friend’s uncle, or an old teacher’s son. Those of us without a loss knew someone who had lost someone. Or we had both, or we had heard back, finally, from that old roommate who traded from the 64th floor.

We went back to work, or we never stopped working, or we showed up at the Javitz Center to volunteer. Our steel workers, our masons, our engineers joined the rescue and the recovery work, but we were asked to stay away. We were not skilled volunteers. And we did not recover any of the twenty thousand body parts.

We heard the planes starting to fly again, and isn't that good, that's got to be good, and we heard on TV of new security measures. We were recent college grads and our jobs were unaffected, or our investment firms found temporary offices in mid-town where we found leaflets on PTSD in the bathrooms or on the coffee tables in the waiting area, or we listened on our commute that someone buried had finally been pulled out alive from the wreckage, and when the report proved false we chided ourselves for believing. The rescue was re-classed as a "recovery." We settled for reports about the perpetrators, their training, and it was good to know because not knowing would be worse. We were mourning now, or we were gathering strength.

We were encouraged to stay connected, to get connected, or to return to normal activities. Staying in our post-college apartments on the weekend was depressing, so we smoked cigarettes on our friends parents' suburban back porches like it was high school again. We threw a baseball around the yard. The sun was still hot, but no longer strong. It was very good weather. It was excellent weather, but the sun went down too early now.

The Mets were playing again, or the Yankees that day—someplace far from the city. The Mets would come back first. We thought more games should be canceled or we thought any change would be "letting terrorism win," or we didn't find it important enough to care. But we were definitely uncomfortable joining any crowd.

We stayed on the porch and drank in pairs of two or three, or we watched our friends drink and thought how strange of those inside, to cover emotion by watching a baseball game, or we watched the game inside and thought the same of those who outside covered it all over with beer. Or we didn't think, we just covered over, covered over.

The broadcast showed a video montage of Shea Stadium, which had been a staging area for supplies. It showed the team unloading trucks during days of canceled games. It showed the tacky giant plastic apple sunken in its hat awaiting the next home

run. It faded out with a shot of the giant scoreboard, of the still complete skyline bandaged with a ribbon looped over the towers. We thought it was a nice touch, or we didn't notice, or the image was forever burned into our minds. Or we imagined the giant ribbon should have been there during the attacks—that maybe then the jumpers would have slid down to safety. Or the ribbon might have unfurled through the sky to provide a path for those whose time it was to go—to someplace people didn't kill one other, or even to where people didn't die at all.

We assumed the first mass gathering would attract a bomb and wouldn't risk it, or we assumed there were those that would like to bomb us and so we should definitely go in defiance. Or we wanted to witness a next chapter, or at least something different, or at least something normal. Or our group was too small, too insignificant, and we wanted to stand among thousands.

The security check would be extensive, and we left early. We breezed on the HOV on the LIE returning to Outkast and Gorillaz. We sung along, or we tried to, or we just looked out the window at the Throgs Neck as we slammed into Cross Island Parkway traffic. We turned to the pregame and we crawled toward the stadium. We parked by the exit gate, near the 7 train, and we circled the stadium to the west side, to the end of the new baggage-check lines that extended half-way into the parking lot. We took in the sea of people as we pretended not to. There were parking lot barbeques, but not as many. There were football tosses, but shorter ones, and no lobs over the heads of the incoming foot traffic. There were conversations, but they were private and not garrulous. Mostly we took our place in line and walked toward stadium security. We were New Yorkers, but not the same as we were. We were a single, stoic, premeditated line, advancing one step at a time.

The lines moved faster than we expected and we took our tiny flags at the gate, and we thought this was cheesier than a bobble-head, or that this was how corporations made money despite atrocities, or we knew this was the only thing to do, and we waved it and cheered. We were in. We took two giant escalators forty-five degrees up to the green mezzanine seats and tipped the man who walked us down to our seats, to hover behind home plate.

As the game began, we were only half-engaged, and we missed the right moments to cheer. We were heavy, and it still hurt when a fourth-inning run scored on our error; or when Piazza, our best player, lumbered home on a sacrifice fly, we stood like we were supposed to stand, but mostly we sat, mostly we watched, and mostly the game moved uneventfully into the seventh inning stretch, moving too fast, giving us less than we had hoped, or about what we expected—after all, this was baseball. And these were the Mets.

Liza Minnelli stepped on for “New York, New York,” escorted by a policeman on her left arm and a fireman on her right. We thought her reflective blouse too much, her smile and frenetic waving overdone. We wondered if she thought we had come to see her. Or did she take this as some kind of celebration? Or had she been drinking again? Or had we all been drinking too much? And what was up with that impromptu kick line of police and firemen behind her? Or we noticed the one in the white hat, the fireman in the center of the kick line, offering the men his arms and his shoulders but his feet didn’t move. He offered an apologetic half-smile, perhaps thinking of his men, of his unit, too unthinkable to dance, and so he only swayed as much as he was forced to. The kick line bucked disjointedly on either side, never finding a rhythm. Or we imagined ourselves as more of a part of the city, or imagined parts of our city one day becoming whole.

Franco from Brooklyn pitched through two quick outs in the eighth, and we liked our chances. Or we expected the walk and a single that followed, or we resented that he would be replaced, unable to finish his own inning, and our resentment was substantiated when his replacement, the young closer gave up a line-drive double in the gap and we were down 2-1, and we wondered why we stayed so long and how anyone could care about baseball these days, and how stupid we were for caring even if for just a minute. Or we were patient and still curious if this was really how our night would end after so many nights ending so badly. We inhaled the pretzels, the hotdogs, and guided peanut shells with our feet behind the seat in front of us. We thought about the days we came here with our fathers, or riding in on the 7 with friends before we could drive, about almost catching a foul ball, or about catching one again.

Our lineup wasn't deep, but we had the top of the order guys up. Alfonso took what looked like strike three. We held our breath and then cheered when he took off for first with a walk. Piazza walked up with the bat on his shoulder, the familiar chant rained down followed by the five rhythmic claps: "Mike Pi-azz-a." We knew if there was a moment to hit one out, this was it, or we knew we were kidding ourselves. Or we forgot percentages, like only Mets fans could, or only Mets fans had to, and imagined one swing to put us up for the first time that night, but either way we stood and we fed the chant.

He took the same pitch on the corner that had walked Alfonso. Strike. And that alone deflated the chant. But we stayed standing anyway as he stepped out of the box and then stepped back in. We cheered again, or we chanted, or we watched. We didn't see the pitch or the drop of the barrel, but we heard the crack of his bat. We didn't want to get too excited, or we already knew. We watched the flight into the deepest part of the field, where the bagpipes had entered, toward where the ceremony had begun. We believed it before he swung, or we believed it only when the ball ricocheted within the three-story

camera scaffolding—a no-doubter, a moon shot. Piazza. Of course. And we danced and we raised our arms in the air like lunatics as Piazza trotted around second, or we couldn't see him in the mess of hugs and high-fives, and mostly we smiled and we smiled, and we felt genuinely good, and we yelled and yelled and we yelled. The stadium reverberated into the next batter and we stopped watching and spoke too loudly so we could be heard. Our bodies buzzed as we nodded our heads.

It felt like waking up.

We didn't need to stay for the ninth. We made our way from the Mezzanine and up the ramp and across the circle of concessions and stuffed our plastic cups into the trash and headed toward the ramps down on the outside edge of the stadium.

It was night along the edges of the stadium and we paused with the smokers to watch LaGuardia. In the daylight the planes seemed to land on the water, to suspend and then taxi on that blue surface. But now the lights of the runway gave us markers in white and red. We watched the arrivals fall into their individual spirals within a funnel of the landing pattern. So many coming home, but many more were just passing through. The crowd roared once more in the background. Two more outs to go.

It was quiet out on the concrete slabs, under the wires, on the ramps—just a collection of smokers and people staring out at the planes. We kept our eyes on those lights as we turned down the ramp, or turned as a new echo was born—a man was clapping that five-part rhythm, that chant from inside, supplemented with new words. “Kill Bin La-din” he yelled, *clap, clap, clap-clap-clap*, and then the four others in our group joined, and then other early-exiters funneled into us from the lower levels turning and smiling or joining the next bar: “Kill Bin La-din” they sang together as we moved downward.

I stepped back but bumped into people behind me who carried me forward within their lustful chant, walking down the ramps. The stadium roared at the second out, and the clapping and chanting from above grew as new people laughed and woo-hooed and joined the exit party, rhythmically moving down into the darkness, chanting again: “Kill Bin-La-din” *clap, clap, clap-clap-clap*, now exiting into the parking lot, a parade of the contented, spilling out of the stadium, together and with renewed power.

I dropped further back as they fanned out to their cars and continued with their cheer, but now disjointed in the distance. My friends led the way past the 7 train, chanting all the way to the back of the parking lot, to their car. I drifted, the distance between us growing, but I needed to be further still. The stadium lights grew dimmer in a giant ‘C’ behind me, until I couldn’t take one more step toward their car, and that’s when I heard that roar—the remaining fans were counting the last strikes.

I looked to the right, at the broad opening to that twelve-foot high chain link fence and imagined all the routes under the city and through it. All the roads and trains that left The Island, went through the city, but there were so many. I took my last look at the silhouettes heading to their cars, and instead of leaving with my friends, I turned south, exiting the parking lot toward the elevated tracks of the 7. I stepped up the serrated stairs and onto the steel platform and stopped before the two windows of the train door.

The crowd was roaring once more in the background, longer this time, and the victory music joined them on the PA. The door opened and I stepped through it.

It was over. And something had just started.

Kairos: Year Zero

I step back and watch myself board a train from Penn Station, bound for Colorado. As the train accelerates, there is a different me reflected in each window. I am back behind these

scenes, where I see many past homes at once. I can sense *You* watching too, weaving scenes, gathering my ends. The windows blur together until there is just a single screen.

Look, you say, look. These timber worlds consume us. Incessantly we sail onward. How are the winds to be abandoned? Your Maori accent is gone. You were last a New Yorker too.

The screen comes into focus. I am a warrior—a war general—in ancient India, where I walk along a hillside, trailing my king the morning after the battle that has won us Kalinga. We survey hundreds of thousands of bodies lying about the land, crooked among spears, swords, fallen horses and war elephants. Our soldiers and theirs have all turned a purplish-blue—all now wear the uniform of death. We look down upon the banks of the Daya River where they lay like gutted fish. The fallen’s splayed arms and legs extend, touching the river, as if they have turned the water red by whispering some charm. In the shallows, hips and torsos are embedded like stones, and in the depths, the heads or bloated chests of corpses bob up and down as they move downstream toward the next village. This is our land now; where the bodies wash up, those too will be our people.

My king is on one knee, staring intently at the river. Tears stream down his face. “Pull them all out,” he orders, pushing himself up from the ground. “Never again.”

Our fathers and grandfathers had failed here, but today, with us, the ports are won. Why did they fight in the face of such numbers? But if my king wants pits, I will have them dug. If he wants fire, we’ll pile and burn the corpses. If he’s done with war, so am I.

Hundreds of years later, in the time of the Tang, I fashion myself a poet out of the mold of Li Bai, quitting my government post like him, to wander across the land. Although my poems are no match for his spirit, I imagine that my travel follows the way of his brush. An Lushan brings death and desolation from the north like one tipping an

ink pot down an ancient scroll, and so I am forever moving to avoid their reach. I reach back to our stolen cities and towns, only to dip my brush in the ink of the blood and tears of my people, and then I ride on. It's early, and my old friend is still asleep in his room. As a parting gift I compose a verse of leave-taking. I place it on the old wooden table beside the door, and find he has left me something too—a woodblock print of a star navigation map, and on the back, Li Bai's "Hard Road" copied in his own hand.

Next, it's Year Zero in Cambodia and we are being removed from our home in Phnom Penh. The teenage soldiers and prison guards work to remove the ancient ways and knowledge by exterminating old men like me. I am separated from family and dragged to Tuol Sleng prison under the suspicion of being an intellectual because I wear glasses. I am tied to a steel bed on top of a red tiled floor in an otherwise empty room. Young men, I tell them, you don't need the ropes for this worn-out pile of bones. They challenge me to save my own life—Confess! They say, Give us the names of your faction!

I still have hope. After all, I explain, I only teach math. Everyone has a use for math. But they suffocate me half to death with a plastic bag and I see such logic will not carry here. I catch my breath, and confess to reading poetry along with my faction, the spies. I offer them the names of Du Fu, and Li Bai. One writes on a pad while another knocks his pencil to the floor—guilty in his recognition of the names.

I regret consorting with so many fools, I say. So many drunks. The kid picks up his pencil. The room is still, and so I ramble about Li Bai—how he loved to travel by boat until his last night, when he was so moved by the moon's reflection on the water that he leaned over to embrace it, fell through it, and drowned.

China's most famous drinker, one guard says.

Li Bai could drink, I say to him, playing to my crowd. But there's also the intoxication of ideals. My neck cramps and I stare back up at the white ceiling, imagining their future. Perhaps in some past life, I think, I was also like them. You are drunk on Pol Pot's ideals, I say. What new history are you throwing us into? I will never stop you. But hear me out. I look them each in the eye, knowing it might be the last thing I ever say: If you kill for those ideals, that's what you'll remember. That's what you'll be remembered *for*. Your pits will remain right beside you. Start over at zero, but this truth will always be waiting.

I am brought to a killing field where my throat is sliced on both sides with an axe, so deeply that my last breaths are drawn through the wounds, as if I have gills. They kick me into the pit with the others, and as I fall I see myself as an Indian war general, surveying the banks of a battle piled high with dead men flayed like fish. Then I am a wandering poet during the Tang dynasty. I leave my friends and family notes of leave taking. I pick up my Lai Bai poem like a talisman, to carry on to the next road. There is always a next road.

Hard Road

In a chalice of gold, clear liquor at ten thousand a pot.
On jade plates, delicacies worth ten thousand coins.
I put down the cup, fling away the chopsticks.
Who can choke it down?
Unmoored, I draw my blade, searching the four directions.

I would cross the Yellow River, but ice blocks the way.
I would climb the Taihang Mountains, but snow blankets the range.
In idleness, Jian Shang dropped a hook into the emerald stream and caught power.
Yi Yin found the goal through dream—casting off in a boat beside the sun.

The journey is hard. The journey is hard.
Many paths fall from the way.

What direction to travel now?

A tailwind will rise to cleave these waves.

Hoist the sail to clouds: This boundless ocean is for crossing.

The window before me settles into red rock fins under the blue sky. I am behind the wheel of my car, floating across the West over this ancient seabed. White tufts of cottonwood seed pour through the passenger side window. I catch a seed and pinch it between my thumb and index finger. Incessantly we sail onward. Someday, I may find the way across. But for now, I'm just trying to make my way back. Let's start again at zero.

Vanessa: Gears

From the red loveseat in my suite on the ferry, the black room forms around me. I imagine the visible universe. How beings at any point are at their own center. Some in a cauldron of liquid metal. Others on trains. Some with lanterns, others without. Still others like me, with rooms of my karmic connections all around, like flowers on a petal. In between each, is another petal, another room. But in which one can I stay? I dive through curving lines, between rooms, brushing all my history of action. My past actions ripple out—my intentions and their impact on others are my corridors. My actions bounce back to me as open and closed rooms, as potential places of birth. I look into the rooms. I look in. I look in.

Again, the porthole of glass is before me, but Jules is not there. I will have to dive now to find her. How many lifetimes have we been tied? I have to get her out. I reach my hand toward to the glass.

“Or you could pay what we’ve given you forward,” my father says, from the far side of the room.

I retract my hand from the window before they come into contact. Behind me, the ship's room is like a broad chapel, but emptier. My father stands with a single pedestal beside him. He offers a bright smile from where he stands on the elevated half-circle stage in his favorite khaki blazer and tan slacks.

I look back to the porthole. "I have to try, Dad."

"You've tried," he says. "And tried. It's not that they don't already have openings. Why don't you show them how to walk through a different door?"

"Can I do both?" I ask, sneaking a look at him.

"We're heading across to the Great Divide. You're so close," he says, scuffling his foot on the stage. "If you abandon ship now," he looks at me, "are you sure you will find your way back on?"

"I don't know. Why wouldn't I?" I ask.

He waves me over, "Let me show you something."

I walk up to the stage, and stand with him beside the sphere pedestal. The lights overhead are blinding.

On the pedestal sits a glass dome, several times larger than any snow globe I have ever seen. It houses a pile of horizontal gears piled on top and beside one another, broad and dense at the bottom where one or two massive gears support those on top. The gears are built on top of themselves. They become thinner and smaller in diameter as they stack up. The structure is spinning—everywhere. Gears: large, small, and miniature, intertwine with one another, all sandwiched in such a configuration that I cannot tell where the turning originates.

"You want me to go in there?" I ask.

"Aren't you?" he asks, his voice soft and slow. "Let me show you how the rooms work." He slides the glass cover up over the gears like a restaurant warming tray,

revealing a dish. He then moves a bow-shaped piece of metal from the back of the structure like he is decreasing the throttle on a ship. It arches over the gears, and when nearly down, he holds up a finger and explains, “Now we will enter the next room.” He puts his weight onto the lever, producing a slight crunch, disrupting the seamless flow of the mechanism. It reminds me of the captain closing the door to the ferry. Gears are now working against themselves, creating a tonal disharmony, threatening to disband and fly off of the pedestal at any moment.

I blink and open my eyes in a new land. He and I are walking along an ancient elevated walkway, a frozen wave through the sky, weathered stone and mortar lay under our feet and form the walls on either side of us. Twenty yards ahead, Leo is in orange robes with an alms bowl. He lifts his bowl lid as Kai places food in his bowl, but they remain only in my periphery. I am fixated on the beauty of the distant city at the end of the path. The city is a bundle of towers of varying heights with ornate cupolas. They are colorless, their outline transparent as if they were made out of air.

The gearbox might have produced the vision, but the causes of this experience couldn't continue. The gears were spinning for the last time back in the room on the ship. When the structure stops turning, I will fall from this world. Like a windup toy my time is short and the loss will be sudden. I take one last long look, knowing only that I longed to keep walking here above everything, to stay here, and that I have been away from here for far too long. I have to get back.

“I don't have much time,” I say.

“Come back up to the pavilion,” my father says from behind me as the vision of the city fades.

“How do I do that?” I ask, staring at the last visible copula.

“You stand up from the sofa and walk back up the stairs,” he chuckles. “The pavilion is the ferry’s top deck.”

“Is there still time to get back to the path?” I ask him.

“Yes. Don’t waste time. There’s time.”

Vanessa: Crossing

There is a crack in the PA system and then a man’s voice powers through the wind: “Can we have your attention please. All passengers that have not handed in their language please do so at this time. In this way, we can continue the trip.”

“Did he mean luggage?” I ask my father.

The man over the PA pauses. I can hear a piece of paper blowing in his hand. “This includes: all reading materials—novels, poems, letters, handwritten journals, and notes of all kinds,” he continues. “These will not be returned. No bartering or trading. There will be no new language borrowed at this time. No writing is exempt. This very page will be taken by—” he mumbles to someone beside him as the PA system clicks off.

My father and I sit close to the edge of the ship, on one of forty beige plastic benches bolted onto the deck facing the stern and then the distant harbor. The tall hills of Port are already reduced to the last bit of purple-black along the horizon.

“I noticed you shaved your head,” I say, still looking at the horizon.

“It took you long enough,” he says.

“I also noticed that you aren’t actually my father. You’re just wearing his clothes. I’ve been too preoccupied.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “But you’re here. That’s what’s important.”

“My father was more handsome,” I say, stealing a look at him.

“Yes, Dear,” he agrees. “I’m just the ugly projections of those looking at me.”

I open my mouth to speak, but can't find the words. "You're not that bad looking"
I stumble. My eyes fix back on the open sea behind the boat. I crack into a half-smile.

"Sure," he says. "Ok."

"It's just that my father was uncommonly good-looking."

"Of course," he says. "If we called him ugly, what would we be implying about
your looks?"

I laugh and look at him. He sits perfectly upright, but relaxed in his shoulders.

"Of course, if you find yourself in my situation one day, you won't be able to help
how they see you," he says. "You'll wear the new face each one you're helping gives
you. There's not much to hold onto if you go forward."

"I can play a role like yours?" I ask.

"In time," he says.

"As long as I can keep my name," I say and smile. He gives no response and my
words fall harder than I expect in the silence. I survey the deck of seated passengers
behind us. The man in the black and white hat—adorned with golden branches, gold
rope, and a gold insignia—must be the captain. He ushers several collectors in black suits
down the first aisle carrying empty red five-gallon fuel containers. The winds rip away
most of the sound of their voices. The passengers shred books and journals with their
hands, stuffing them into the fuel tanks. A guide sits beside each passenger, watching the
exchange but not moving. The captain points to their front pocket or to an overlooked
handbag. The passengers try to do better for him, hurriedly searching themselves for any
remaining scraps of papers and receipts they might have forgotten. The captain smiles,
tips his hat—grasping it along the golden branches along the black rim—and moves on.

Most travelers scan the deck, trying to gauge how much time they have before it
is their turn. There are the more composed people and the hungry ones—all the varieties

found on any deli line. Some don't wait at all and race for the lifeboats, lowering themselves down into the sea by the rope pulley. I catch an older woman with glasses tear a piece of paper from a book and hunch over to sneak-stuff it into her mouth. She sits up, her eyes scanning the other passengers, and slowly begins to chew.

"It's your choice," my guide is saying. "You get to shape your path."

I close my eyes and meditate, and tell myself: think about the breath, because soon we need to let all the words go.

I picture the lantern from the meditation center and find that warm glow in my chest, sheltering it from the winds of my mind.

My guide continues, "You can get back on a lifeboat, head back to a similar kind of life. Maybe longer next time, with the trauma only coming at sixty when your parents and friends finally start to leave you, when your back starts to fail, when the cancer starts."

I stay with the warm energy in my chest and spread it throughout my whole body, and then I expand it more so the glow pervades every corner inside, and so that it also surrounds me as a white light. I want another choice.

"But if you do decide to go on and help them, don't get any romantic ideas. All you can do is present choices. You can show them the causes and effects of this action, versus the causes and effect of that action. The causes of this birth, the effects of that one."

"And if *I* want to go further?" I ask with my eyes still closed.

"That's an option too," he says. "Hold on to what's useful; let go of what isn't. Let's see how far you can go. Build only solid worlds, and always leave yourself a way out. Because when it's time to fall, it's time to fall. It's better not to come down with the building."

The boat shutters as it moves through the waves. “Yes,” I say, keeping my eyes closed, “I remember.” I solidify my concentration so there is a lattice of light all around me, feeding me. As time passes, I can feel the sunlight grow less intense, and then it slips off my face entirely. Cool winds blow across the ship deck and refresh me. I open my eyes, and only the twilight remains.

I hear faint bells, then from some distance, someone calling: Va—ness—a. “Are you coming to the divide?” It’s Kairos. I look over my shoulder, but he is not there. There is just the captain and collectors, still several rows away. *Am* I going to the divide?

Finally, it’s my turn. The captain kneels beside our bench, and a collector places a red fuel tank beside me on the deck. The captain speaks in a language I don’t understand, too guttural, too staccato, then tries another, the sky dimming behind him.

He sees that I recognize his language now.

“We’ll be in water clear across to the divide now,” he says in English. “We’ve got a long way to go, but we’ll get you there. The only danger is if you are still tied up in words. All language please.” He nods toward the fuel tank.

I place my hand on the fish hook bone carving around my neck before I realize what I am doing. I am thinking about the note I tied for Jules in New Zealand. About my mother’s flowers. My father’s fish. I hope they will all get out, I think. With that thought, I move my hair through the necklace, and slip it off around my head. Holding on just makes you sink. I press the smooth hook into my hand until the point bites.

“The words are only in my head,” I say. “I don’t have anything written down.”

“Your name then,” the Captain says.

“My name?”

“Your name, Dear, your name.”

“Vanessa—” I begin but he interrupts.

“Please write it down,” he says with a smile.

My guide tears a piece of paper from a pad of yellow paper. He holds the paper in his lap and waits for me to take it, gazing straight ahead at the sinking sun.

“What is a name but a particular bout of passion?” The captain says to no one in particular. “What is a name, but tying yourself to its fire? What is a name but a knot?”

My guide does not turn to catch his eyes.

“You need more fuel?” I ask, removing the piece of paper from my guide’s hand.

“Yes,” the captain says, handing me a pen, “and *you* need less resistance.”

I refuse his pen and take a fine tip felt pen from my purse. I place the paper on the bench. I write my name. The small bumps on the plastic bench make it difficult and it looks like the writing of a child. I tear the pen from the page as I finish, as if I were snapping a line of string. I offer him an uneasy smile.

“Always so hopeful. So hopeful,” he says.

“Do I take a new name now?” I ask.

“Not until we get to the Great Divide.” He looks down at the scroll tucked up against my leg. “Let’s see that map.”

I open it for him as he and my guide look on.

“Who else do you think wants to board?” the captain asks. In the map’s key, he presses a drawing of a hook, beside the word, “Fish.” A line appears on top of the map, as if it were a three-dimensional tank of water. The three of us lean over to watch as the line moves across the map in cursive script like an unweighted fishing line dropping into water.

When embraced
the rod of violence
breeds danger & fear:
Look at people quarreling.

I will tell of how
 I experienced
 dismay.
 Seeing people floundering
 like fish in small puddles,
 competing with one another —
 as I saw this,
 fear came into me.
 The world was entirely
 without substance.
 All the directions
 were knocked out of line.
 Wanting a haven for myself,
 I saw nothing that wasn't laid claim to.
 Seeing nothing in the end
 but competition,
 I felt discontent.
 And then I saw
 an arrow here,
 so very hard to see,
 embedded in the heart.
 Overcome by this arrow
 you run in all directions.
 But simply on pulling it out
 you don't run,
 you don't sink.

I run my fingers over the fish hook bone carving as he watches me. “For safe travel,” I say.

“For hauling up a world, Dear,” he says and smiles. “And now you have a few more lines to cast with. Let’s find an opening from the pavilion.”

The red lights burn like embers across the top deck and all is quiet. The ship picks up speed, spitting eddies, stirring phytoplankton to the surface that glisten in neon swirls,

settling into a glowing path of color that rides on top of the waves as far as I can see. The neon swirls spread from the sea and into the air—the rooms are open all around me as we travel.

I see Kairos as a silver cursive line driving up and down through the mountains. Soon, we all will be taken by water. The waves will again erase us. One phrase. One name at a time. We dive back without crossing.

Kairos: Night 1, Density

It's Niwot's curse, that pull from Boulder Valley, that supernatural gravity, a cord that brings you back despite every intention to leave. How I returned, I can't tell you exactly. I don't remember any specific intention to. There was the closing of many doors, and then the single opening that I walked through as it also shut behind me, and here I am sweating bullets in the attic of an old Colorado farmhouse painted aqua—like I'm some ship-wrecked mariner carried by a wave that threw me back over the continental divide. It's night and I'm still damp in the heat, breathing, but stunned. I lie alone and as sleep returns my last thought is one sensitive to the strangeness of walls—the density of the building that surrounds me.

When I close my eyes, my stomach tenses. My mind groans, "What are you doing in a house? Get back to the desert." Of course it is never that easy. Even the campsite I lived at charged for meals as part of the work exchange, and I'm about out of money. I know I need some help, but I also know there are rules: you only get the help you earned; you only get the guide you deserve. My thighs stick together in the drying sweat, and the hexagonal ceiling is swinging toward me, closing in like a vault. I hear cicadas, the whine of the coyotes, as I drift into an uncomfortable sleep.

Kairos: Earlier Day 1, Journey

At first, I thought the blank spots were a symptom of fatigue. I was on my old drive across a continent; I had wanted to stay alert. It had been years and I didn't want to miss any part. I don't think I blinked, from ocean, through desert, the canyons, the mountains, the plains. Twelve hours in, my eyes went.

It was somewhere over the sand coral canyons at sunset. Here the earth, in layers of white and beige and Indian-paint red, lifted itself like a palm, fingers extended toward the horizon—remnants of when the earth broke in Southern Utah and emptied the Great Basin into the Gulf of Mexico, when half of the earth ran downstream in a rush, leaving gaps and new canyon spaces in shadow. The sun and canyons were reenacting this cataclysm, as the reds met the blues. Light seemed to emerge from the rock as the sky hit the ground. I too was racing back through time, searching my mind for an island—a memory on which to land.

I gunned the diesel-hybrid toward the finger canyons running into the now dark-purple East. As the light faded, I waved goodbye to the West with my right hand and realized that my eyes hadn't registered that action. The periphery of my vision was missing—I tested: left, right, above, and below. My gorge rose. I knew only that I was complicit in an act of self-deception. How much had I already missed? What portion of the world was I permitting myself to see?

I focused on the road, but struggled through half-formed memories and imagined conversation with those I once meditated with in New York, in Colorado, and in the desert. I fought off the distractions. I needed water. I was dehydrated and hallucinating, but I needed to keep driving within this tunnel of vision—it would be the only way back.

Kairos: Night 1, Travel

I sit up and look down on my body as it rests, safe in the Colorado farmhouse. My vision is strained by the low-light, but I can see my own hands on my chest as they rise and fall. From the windows complete on three sides of the room, I view the dusk again. There are only a few high-flying birds and shadowy trees being eaten by the night's gray—now creeping over the rest of the land. My body rests separately from my awareness of it. I do not possess a heart in the way it can race, and so it is a simple curiosity to me that a being, a hungry shade, is straddling my windowsill. He has long dark hair, and wears rawhide like an Indian. His gaze turns from the trees to look at me, his eyes with the same pale dusky glow as the sky surrounding his silhouette. His purpose for this visit is unclear, but his body is at ease. Perhaps he is the guide I've been looking for. He pinches his thumb and fingers together and brings it close to his mouth and then lets his arm drop. He repeats the gesture twice and then disappears out the window. I am hungry too. And tired. I've been reminding myself often that I'm fifty, to be careful not to move too fast—but here I am scrambling after him. My movements are surprisingly effortless. I am on the roof and down a crisscrossed flower trellis like grandma's, a mere moment after the intention first arose.

Surely the shade will direct me. On the ground the hungry shades multiply, or they had been there, waiting. I cannot really tell the difference between the last shadows of the trees and the hungry shades, but the general movement seems to be west. I follow where the shapes lead, through the twilight and up along the creek. I am relieved to be walking back west, but I am still such a long way from returning to the desert. I follow the shades on up through yellow cottonwoods to fins of red rock. One looks back for me and waits, then we keep walking.

They are connected to the dusk. They gather here every evening, these wanderers who linger in the lands they can't let go. And I am one of their tribe too, if not in blood, then in the habits of my movements: returning to my city, coming back for what I've lost, for the people I keep missing.

The chief sits on a slab of red sandstone, leaning on a short staff, caressing the top of it as he rocks back and forth. His ornaments of metal and stone strung on rawhide move around him. His ears and hair enclose him in lines of a dark halo. He nods at the shades I followed here from my backyard. One of them motions for me to also sit. The shade then takes his spot on the red earth under yellow cottonwoods ready to serve his chief as interpreter. He signs words to the chief with his fingers. He touches his chin, his arm—his eyes lighting within each pause. His face is weathered and still. He takes his fingers to his mouth. He rubs his belly in a circle, his hand seems to become stuck in the motion, repeating the gesture.

The chief finally opens his palms in question and the interpreter stands, two knots of hair bounce back to his chest. The interpreter moves with energy now, bending for a stick to draw something into the pink earth, and then pauses. The shades from the edges move in. We circle him together and lean into the groove he is scratching into the earth. We are thirsty. So thirsty. We circle for a taste, a drop.

The groove turns from pink to red—as if the earth were bleeding—until water percolates up through the impression and begins to wash our bare feet. We drop to the ground faces first and we drink on all fours. Like animals, we lap at the water with our lolling tongues. We are so intent on drinking that none hear the static buzz, like wind, cutting down the canyon. We lift our mouths, rimmed with red. The shades twist left and right, their tattered hides swinging after them. The sound clarifies as it nears—timber is cracking behind us. The shades run down, but I scramble up toward the now deafening

sound, to the top of the fin of rock, and when I look back toward the shades, there are only torrents of water, breaking trees, dislodged boulders falling into the currents. I stand on a rock island, water ripping around on all sides, flooding the canyon and washing up either side of the valley. The shades are gone. The waters grow, cart-wheeling debris down into Boulder Valley and the Great Plains and then just as quickly, it dissipates and collects back into a central stream, full and steady. It is done.

I pick my way through the unrecognizable landscape—between half-standing trees and piles of rock and mud—and survey the rubble of the plains. It takes a few moments until my eyes find the first one, face down in a pool of water, and then I see their bodies everywhere, not shadows but flesh, half-embedded in the red dirt, animal-eaten and sun-dried. Such time has already passed. Night has returned.

I sit on the borrowed ground. The stolen ground. The piece of earth we had to have, at any cost. The night before Niwot first met the whites, here at Red Rocks, his shaman had a dream that a flood ripped down the mountains drowning his Arapahoe people. Only a couple years after first meeting the whites, Niwot brought sixty of his starving and dwindling people to live under federal protection at Sand Creek, Colorado. They lived at Sank Creek only a short time, until the morning federal troops arrived. The troops surrounded the Indians along the creek banks and shot them, hunted them down among the bushes, sliced the fetuses out of the woman.

People in Boulder will still tell you, that Niwot cursed the whites to forever return to the valley—no matter how many times they leave, or how hard they try to stay away—but that's pure fabrication. Niwot never cursed anyone. We've cursed ourselves to come back here. We've cursed ourselves with our thirst. I'm guilty too, but that's what I do: I wander where my thirst pulls me.

Kairos: Night 1, Meditation

I come back to my body, to the sound of windows rattling in a gust of wind. The Indians are not here, I remind myself—it's 2029 again. My body is wired but I have trouble moving my limbs with accuracy. My hand flops against the wall. My leg swings over the bed, and there is that catch in the flexor tendon of my right hip. No matter how much yoga I do these days, that twinge greets me every morning. In the heat trapped by the attic room, I lumber over to the southern band of windows.

I rest my fingertips on the ledge and open the seal on the window. By the light of a half-moon, I look for the destruction of the landscape, but the trees and two-story houses stand proud. Isabel might still be in town. Once you pop the question, it lingers over that land forever—especially if she says yes. Especially when yes changes to no. Will I become that same starving person stuck in memories of us? Am I different now? Will there be new options? A wisp of cooler air moves into the room.

I sit heavily on the floor as if signaled. The attic heat is less near the floor and I can breathe. I'll meditate. I light a candle so that if I fail to develop a modicum of calm, at least the wax will testify to my perseverance.

I hold my mind to these thoughts and allow space for the internal density, space for the fixation on loss and fatigue, space for the day's twenty-hour tunnel-vision drive to stop repeating in my mind, and space for an uncertain future. I sweep across a continent remembering the drive back, from the west coast to the continental divide, then up the familiar architecture of Broadway in Boulder. I had made my way through town only hours earlier. Street sign after street sign appeared in the headlights and I reacted appropriately, if mindlessly—left, right, left, right—and the farmhouse was on the corner. Below the outline of the mountains I could see a single bulb illuminating the western room on the second floor. I lugged a duffel up the dirt path and fiddled with the garden

latch for far too long, then a door, then walked the creaking stairs to the bedroom—a small room with a strange lattice design on the ceiling and windows overlooking the cottonwoods of the backyard.

My mind is different now, alert and hunting choices. I relax deeper into the body, to gather myself together. The heavy parts of the body seem alien and changeable, as if they belong to someone else. I stop to listen like one straining for the sound of a distant bell. Another wisp of cool air surrounds me from the window. I breathe more deeply and can smell that apple crisp I made on my camping stove last fall in the desert. There you are.

You arrive as a tenderness along my spine, as a familiar tightness loosening, redefined within sudden space. A space that I can both listen to and address, a cloak of oxygen resting on the skin. I sense the night air drifting down fully now from outside. I wait. It turns cooler and the ease seeps into me. I am still tired, but don't care. Life is breathing me for a change. And you are ready for questions.

I don't know your moods, if you have them, and so I am fearful about giving the experience too much faith. I am already contemplating the good-bye. What will support me if this groundlessness stretches on? Who will collect my pieces if I let go? The room begins to spin.

"No one," you say, cutting the romance from the space. You won't let me fall in love with you. My body is a vapor, a gentle starburst detonation—I want to have this at will and I want the feeling to stretch over years. For a moment, I have company after years in the desert. I trust your calm in the silence, the kindness of this space.

The density returns but I don't accept it as part of me. Perhaps I'm not as hard up as it seemed. Despite the journey, I feel fine. My claim of hardship and loss is already

fraying at the seams. I open my eyes and blow out the candle. I crawl into bed. I sleep dreamless and hard.

My eyes open at five am. That quiet torment is creeping back into my body—between my ribs, and up around my throat. It was too late to keep it from spreading. It is the familiar terror that returns nightly, and settles over my body like a lead blanket, finally forcing open my eyes, posing unanswerable questions like, “What next?”

For over twenty-five years it drove me to splice the formula back together—find a town, find food that I liked, find a new job I could stomach, and find a new girl. A distinct feeling of pleasure and pain permeated everything. When pleasure rose, I tried to ride it longer each time. When the pain came, I patched it. If I felt terror in the face of such instability at that start, it would pass after the new “normal” was established. But this time the question has a different tone. “*What next?*” This time my concentration catches the words as if crushing a seed. This is the whole next story sprouting. But putting that whole situation back together hardly seems worth it. When the old formula ran its course, I would just come back to the farmhouse, the entrances always changing, but my room always unoccupied and waiting. I walk with the shades and long for what I had. I rebuild that human life all over again, (and again, and again). And at fifty now? What’s the point?

With time, the early morning light reflects amorphous shapes onto the grooved ceiling. I look at the pieces one at a time, rolling them over in my mind: a place, good food, the right job, a woman, an acceptable mixture of pleasure and pain. I envision finding her in a plausible way—she’s a co-worker, we have mutual friend at a barbeque, we meet at a yoga class. And of losing it all in the most plausible way—she wants children; she finds somebody younger; I spend too much time away from home.

I still want it and yet can see too many endings to begin. Acting on one doesn't seem worth the energy. It isn't just depression; it's a dilemma, and one I saw years ago and yet refused to do anything about it.

I reposition myself on my back in the center of the small bed so that I fit within the three walls without touching them. The terror has intensified, settled under the skin, and outlined a hole of longing.

Yes, I know.

"So what next?" you say, and I realize that this conversation had been looping for more than a few days.

For the first time, I accept that there might be different directions than those I have considered. I become quiet. Then I start asking questions.

Is there a turn that I missed? Are there other options? I know change is hard. So what can I do first? This is where you come in. Your answer goes here: _____

Well?

I sleep. I have the strangest dreams. I step from room to room. I hear your voice through every door, but I can't find you anywhere.

Vanessa: Change in Orientation

I watch Kairos from the pavilion. I watch him open a single box in his mind, a single thought unfolding in the way he is used to thinking, a simple memory of the type he enjoys recalling. You might call this a window or a door that you open. I call this repackaging, the stepping from one box into another.

The box becomes a room. There is nearly always a being already there, or if not another being often appears. Some you speak to and some you don't. Some have

interesting thoughts about this place, some don't. And then you move on with the next thought, the next memory, the next decision, opening your eyes to another room, perhaps even on another floor. But it isn't really that simple. It's more like rooms within rooms, which makes it impossible to say exactly where you are. Are you in this new place encapsulated by the old and familiar place? Or does the old rest inside the new? Somehow, both realities are true simultaneously but your mind cannot form a picture of what this means at all.

Oh, you will continue to open a door here and conceive of your next decision there, but the instant you realize you've got it all under control—emboxed and ordered within your place—you will notice it already becoming other than that. There is an unstoppable change of orientation.

And that's because you are in it. Any picture of outside comes from within the box that produced it. You are drawing and redrawing yourself and stepping into your own pictures. You draw new boundaries within the old boxes. So which ones to think? Which world to slide into next? You are forever stepping back into rooms of your own design.

This is when you realize, for just a moment—or perhaps also for every new moment going forward—that the order you just bestowed on the world has simultaneously emboxed you in its logic (and then emboxed you, and then emboxed you). This is every hell and heaven you will ever know.

I watch you from the pavilion. I watch you open a single box in your mind, a single thought unfolding in the way you are used to thinking, a simple memory of the type you enjoy recalling. You might call this a window or a door that you open. I call this repackaging, the stepping from one box into another.

Kairos, we are forever piecing the building together around us, as the floor haphazardly falls apart. Here is your reorientation: You make every hell and heaven you will ever know. You even make the man in shock as he watches his worlds disintegrate.

Leo: Designs

I'm somewhere on the plains when I open my eyes again. I must have nodded off, but I made it. The doors of the train are open and there's a warm breeze blowing through the deserted outdoor train station into the empty passenger car. The plains stretch out before me on all sides. I stay in my seat and take it all in. I'm in a white suit and wing-tipped black shoes. I pick up the coat and examine the orange silk interior. Nice threads for an escapee. I never thought much of orange, but it's starting to grow on me. I pull my designs from the inside of the jacket pocket and run my finger along the sketched corridors I remember traveling. My finger stops at the hospital out west—like I'm about to be reborn in Colorado.

"Get out," Vanessa's voice instructs and I jump to my feet. I don't know the plains, but it looks a lot better than the hells I just crawled out of. The doors start to close and I push through them, the map getting caught as they close. I pull at the corner and it tears off as the train moves away, like water streaming downhill.

I sit down on a bench on the concrete platform and look at the remains of the map in my hand—just a blank scrap. I toss it and look left and right, but I don't see a soul. It's dusk and I can see every yellow reed of prairie grass and every shadow. It's gonna be completely dark in no time. I notice a fedora on the bench beside me and nonchalantly pick it up. Never know when you'll need a disguise. I move down the concrete steps and instead of walking toward the rows of cars at the train station, I do what any escapee would do and head *away*, straight out into the expanses of the plains.

I pretend that I don't know they're following, but by now I know, the shadow men, the denizens, are always there. Never show your fear. Dry straw grasses crack under my feet and I aim at the dim lights of a distant building on a short plateau. I meander around gullies and patches of mud and step in cow shit. I scrape the bottom of my shoes against the grasses, but I can only remove half of it. I keep moving. The denizens remain at a distance, as if they expect me to willingly turn back and rejoin them. Not a chance; not this time. I crest the last hill and the building spreads its arms around me. I step from the plains and directly onto the sidewalk ramp and into the broad sliding glass door entrance.

I'm panting like a dog. Even the bottom of my pants are stained with shit. I recognize the blond receptionist, manicured hands folded on a desk with passageways leading either way around her. But from where?

"Welcome to the ground floor," she says.

She pushes some brochures toward me with a smile. I brush aside my white jacket and place them in the pocket of my slacks.

She pulls one more pamphlet from her desk and presents it meaningfully. There is a diagram on the cover. Something like the water cycle.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of the emerging business opportunity.” She turns to the diagrams on the inside.

Have I? “I’m not sure.” Have I heard this before?

“Our laboratories can engineer anything. We can make broken glass and crushed tin cans into a palace of your dreams.”

“Oh, do I look loaded?”

“You’re here,” she says. “You must have something. Time to invest? Perhaps you will be willing to examine your account?”

I take another look behind me. “Ok,” I say. “I can do that for you.”

She smiles. “Sign here,” she says. “Your orientation begins in room number four. Just use any door you find open.”

“But—”

“Here you go,” she says handing me a clipboard.

“O . . . k.” I walk behind her into a long industrial hallway. The floors have a thin carpet and everything else—the walls and the doors—are all stainless steel. Blinding lights dangle overhead—they are hung one single bare bulb at a time. I try the first steel door on the right, but it’s locked. The second is just a pit and I close it. I walk past another few steel doors. They look too much like McBride’s back door anyway. Then there is the dorm door with the black tulip. I can’t resist seeing if Vanessa is inside, but as I crack the door, flames shoot out and I jump back and slam the door, but not before they singe my arm. Goddamn! I go to the left side of the hallways and try an orange door. Again it’s locked and I’ve had enough, so I step back and kick the door until it busts the deadbolt through the strike. There, an open door.

I walk into a room with another single bulb hanging over a steel table.

I sit down in front of a clipboard. The edges of the room are so dark now that when a man finally enters, also carrying a clipboard, I can't make out his features until he sits across from me. I can see the gray suit and purple tie though, and I can see that he is a hulking man of my size. My skin goes cold as I place him in the subway, remembering our conversation before I fell into flame. He clenches his square jaw that moves in and out of the light as he looks at our clipboards placed beside one another. As he reads, he grabs some of my paperwork and shoves the sheets under his own, and passes some of his paperwork to me. He wears a fedora too, like he needs a disguise too, like he's on the move. I can't see his eyes.

He takes out a ballpoint pen and moves to the next page. "Name," he demands.

"I forget," I say and he checks a box.

"Date of birth" he asks.

"I don't know," and he checks a box.

"Mode of death," he says.

"Which one?" I say.

He looks up at me and holds my gaze through the shadows. I can see only the outline of his eyes, not the whites, the retina. Each eye-socket appears like one swollen pupil, swallowing the light. Then he looks down to check another box. He continues to search through my papers.

"You've died in the thorns, in the fire, in the vats, in the molten pits. You been skewed with knives, spears . . ." he turns the page and continues to read it silently. "It's a long list," he says finally looking at me. "Did my guys tell you why?"

I thought of the last time I was a grown man, of everything I stole to get high. Of every drug I sold, and the people who died. The men I broke, and the women I held, even when they didn't want me to. I saw their lives tumbling down on the screens of the wall

behind him, and I wanted to tumble after them. So many times I had done so. But I wrap my fingers around either end of my open jacket instead, and I hold on and feel my weight in the chair as he continues to stare at me. The thorns, the fire, the vats—these were my negligence, my insistence that it didn't matter. It mattered.

"They were too preoccupied with carrying out their duties to make conversation."

I finally answer with a shrug. "It's a busy place. But I've got some ideas."

"You sound angry," he says. "Do you have a lot of anger? Because we can't have this conversation here. If you're angry, there are special rooms for that."

"They asked *me* to tell *them* why I was there. Yes. They dressed a lot like you. A whole lotta help confession is. I get it. I *shouldn't* ve a million things. But what does the pain accomplish after the fact? I'm angry at myself, when it comes down to it. But I'm going a different way this time."

"Ok," he says, "maybe you are. But I also see you've traveled on the new lines. If I can give you a bit of advice," and he doesn't wait for me to agree, "don't listen to those beings in that corporation. Just because they have the bright fancy screens, promising you every sort of pleasure for free. Nothing's free. And when you fall from there, you fall dulled and stupid, and you fall hard. You take in all the shimmer and the glitz and forget what you did to get up there. And then you come back here anyway," he raises his hand behind him to the industrial steel walls that surround us. "But trust me, some part of you likes it here. Do you have any idea how often you come back? You've got other places on your circuit, but here . . . let's just say, this place has a pull on you. And guess who's the one always in charge of the neighborhood when you arrive?"

"I don't know," I say. "Probably you."

He smiles. "Listen, I understand the allure. The wardens here have respect. People do what we say. They have to—it's the offenders' own designs after all that have brought

them under us. And I understand why you came back for the job. But did you think we wouldn't notice such arrogance?" He riffles through some drawings of caldrons and pits of molten fluid, and obstacles and torture devices with spears, knives, and sharpened bits of metal. "Your designs?" he asks. "You've been thinking about this for a long time."

I can't help but get a little excited. I mean, some of them are pretty clever. "Yeah, I did this," I say, pointing to the maze where you can jump over the pits until, surprise, you land on the knives. Where you can step over the knives until you fall into the molten pits. Where you can crawl through a maze right into the box of flames. I spent lifetimes designing the circuit and even more living in it. "Ain't much to be proud about—maybe for some people—but there's a lotta hope there," I tell him. "You always think it's about to improve. Other guys are just in a caldron. In and out and back in again. You can tell they didn't put much thought into their actions by the way they suffer. Just harming people willy-nilly. Just a whole lotta whatever. I had my ways. My intricate ways of getting it all just right. And I admit that it was all so intricately wrong."

I point to a diagram he's looking at. This is my favorite invention. "The flames pour through the grate on each wall and strike the opposite wall. A door opens on one side and we go running toward it. As we reach it, it slams shut and we are burnt down until our organs turn to ash and our bones glow. But we don't die of course. At least, not those with karma like mine. The flame licks out our marrow and then we reform, one piece of black sinew at a time. Growing nerve is more painful than burning. Our raw, pink, infantile skin stings just from being in contact with the air. But it gets worse. The flames come back. A door on the far side opens and we go rushing for it, despite the tearing of the skin on the soles of our feet, and as we reach the door, it slams shut. Each time the flames come back we are more tender. Each time it hurts worse. It goes on like

this. People joined me in there. You were there. We all agreed it was one of the most terrible rooms.”

“You must be very proud,” he says. “And what relief you must feel right now to be out of there.” A strange smile spreads across his face and the bulb overhead flickers and dims. “Let’s see how you do in one of my designs.”

I try to shout to stop him, but my voice is barely audible within a growing hum around me. It’s as if the room is fluid and pressing me down. I slump into the seat. I can’t speak. The man sits upright—unaffected by the sudden gravity. I fight just to keep my eyelids open.

“Now,” he says, “your turn to listen. You only know part of the floor plan down here. It’s one hell of a club, let me tell you. We’ve been standing beside you in these hells and laughing—we laugh here—because we don’t have to suffer like you do. You still have a long way to go, before anyone takes you seriously around here. You never burned with any grace, with any stoicism. If you remember, I was there with you smiling, while you were crying for leniency.”

I still can’t move and the weight pressing down on me is crushing.

“So let’s look back for a moment first,” he says adjusting his tie. “Excuse me for taking my time. I have to admit that this is enjoyable for me. When you’re the warden, it’s easy to get caught up throwing the party. But it seems I missed some of the results. It all wasn’t as neat and complete as I imagined when I whispered in your ear.” He leans over the table. “Leo,” he whispers as I struggle to move. “Leo,” he whispers again, “are you trying to say something? Do you remember? Do you know that I can sound an awfully lot like you? It gets people all the time. Don’t beat yourself up about it. Besides, that’s *my* job.”

The screen on the back wall comes to life again. It displays a college dorm room and there I am in my heyday, spooning Vanessa on a loveseat and trying to nibble on her ear.

“There are so many choices from your past actions that I could replay for you,” he says, “but this one seems appropriate for today.”

Vanessa is swatting me back. She is trying to watch the movie. The me in the screen is considering just taking what I want from her. Just taking it. Like maybe this dating game has gone on too long without advancing. Like maybe the right course of action here is more of a gray area. I *am* suffering after all. What’s the holdup? I am just trying these thoughts on to see what they feel like.

I watch the scene now and notice that a shadow appears at this moment and moves rapidly behind me. The scene slows down so I can hear, for the first time, a voice that sounds like the warden’s instead of mine, threading in the next line with a whisper: “If you are going to do it, now is the time,” he says. I watch the scene continue for a moment as I roll onto her.

My eyelids fall closed under the weight of the warden’s steel room. I don’t want to see the rest anyway.

“I had both of you taken care of,” he says. “She would get her payback right then and in time you would get yours. Your fall took time, but I was patient. I enjoyed it. I watched as day by day you fell closer back to the corridors under the neighborhood and under my charge. We’ve had some good times, since your death, touring your designs. But here we all are again. All back together. Shall we continue? Speak up now? Ok we’ll continue then.”

I can hear him rustling a piece of paper. “Next,” he says, “let’s jump forward in time,” like he’s reading a script. “I’ll give you a taste of your future. You’ve suffered a

lot, Leo. But today is your day. Let's say you not only step out of your designs, but you also become warden. Wow. How's that sound? You can make sure justice is served—or your idea of justice at least. You can build the hells first and then go searching for the perpetrators. Build the *anticipation*, Leo. Imagine the years of pleasure of tracking them down. Not only those that harmed you in the past life, but in countless lifetimes into the past. Today is the day you start to act on all those intentions you've made over the years to get them back. To finally make it right. I'm sure you get the idea of how rewarding this job is going to be."

Again, I hear him lift a sheet of paper as I lie paralyzed. "Now, let's jump forward again," he says. "Here's a taste, in your case, of what happens after your time as warden expires, after others have fallen into your designs for thousands, for hundreds of thousands of years. Let's call this next scene your best case scenario after that. When your position folds—and it will fold—you're left with the pride of 'setting everything right' and surprise, you're left with the karma of facilitating the fall of countless beings down into the corridors. Things are pretty far from being right. Whatever bad karma you tried to deal with through warden games has only multiplied.

"So do you head back to a just planet? A place where everyone is behaving? Where no one will get in your way again? Course not. You open your eyes, and you're on the deck in back of McBride's Station. It's 2 a.m. in the morning and someone is trespassing. You remember them—the dirt bags—and wonder how they are still there, and why you never tracked them down as warden. This is the first hint that something is wrong. There are details that remain—details you failed to realize came along with the initial sketches of your designs. Nothing is over.

"You figure maybe you just saved them for last. After all, this is the freshest juiciest human memory, and you have *so much* experience with justice by now. What

revenge could taste better? Just thinking of what you are going to do to the dirt bags fills you with mirth. As soon as you step out, you call all your boys to your side. Danny! Scalper! But here is the second hint that something is wrong: one by one, they turn their backs on you. Every man you believed was as hard as you were, every woman who ever adored you, every parent or sibling or friend that loved you—they all turn their backs on you and walk down the alley. They are shaking their heads. They don't look back. They're all in gray suits now. They yank their purple ties and throw them to the ground. They've stopped. Everyone has gotten out of here but you.

“It grows dark and you sit down on the edge of the deck, but this is a different type of darkness. It presses down on you until you can't move. The pressure is so immense that you would not know if a man was waving his hand in front of your face. The next room is closing in on you now. Nobody will know it but you.

“That's when it hits you—the swiftest loneliness you'll ever find because they're really gone man—poof. All of 'em. After some time—might be a few days, hard to say when you can't tell time—the mind starts to go. The loneliness inside turns into outside perceptions, and you see an expanse extend on all sides. Nobody's coming to help break up the feedback loop. The rooms the mind has built for itself continue to combine into a giant empty hall. There's no new people, no old people, no people-people, no animals, no plants, or ground or air, just black. Like that. As far as you know you have fallen to the end of the universe and you're all that's left, and what you are is a living nightmare. You're so sure about that for some reason. So sure 'bout that. So how you gonna smile, put on a face? For whom? You only believe in your own folly, got such pride in your own folly.

“But then you start to complain—ain’t nothin’ I did wrong! Ain’t nothin’ I did to deserve it—sorry, you just don’t remember. See, you just forgot. This room is your own trip man. And your in-ter-pret-*a*-tion is a weee bit skewed. We are so good at forgetting.

“It takes the mind time to digest its own program, and to start to believe that the whole world really did turn away from you. As if anybody is that important. But it’s easier than you might think to swallow that hook. There are rooms like this for the *important* people especially.

“So now what? Time passes. The claustrophobia settles in. This is a nothing inside that feels a lot like the person you were always afraid you might actually be deep down. Yup, turns out you are that bad after all. It gets a little better from time to time, but mostly it gets worse. It gets so you are cursing and screaming to darkness, to the gods. But even they can’t see you here. This is how it’s gonna be for a long, long time.

“You settle into screaming. An in-*deter*-min-ate time screaming, reminiscing, twisting, untying and re-twisting the pleasures you once had in your hands. This is followed by a brief calm, a resignation. You think you’re done, but you just affirmed the importance of your darkness. It’s gonna hit your insides, just wait. You are becoming pure separation, pure otherness.

“And I don’t know what we’ll call you when you come back. Hope won’t reach you until you are something far, far from the lifeless man in the chair. Tell you this: your suffering ain’t worth nothing. It’s not a commodity. It’s the shit left over. The shit you’ve left yourself. It’d be a nice story to say you’ll be stronger from this, but you don’t learn a thing in this hell.

“Tell me again how you’ve got such pride in your designs. You keep missing the causes that construct these places. You are buried in the tangle. Like everyone else, you

are born high and then you are born low, and you find momentary relief in the contrast. But there's no relief in the dark crib—you pathetic, worthless, arrogant man.

“There's no explanation for this place, and that drives you even madder. There *is* an expiration for this place, but it's not coming for eons. Don't ask me about time because you won't like the answer. First, you will forget there was something called “time,” and called “change,” called “self” and “other,” “darkness” and “light.” You can't map the distances—how far away you are—because you've forgotten that there are other beings entirely. How long you been traveling? Whatever your concept of forever is, it multiplies here. I worked on that room for you. You're welcome. But you're the one that needs to open that door.”

With his last word my head lifts inexplicably. I blink as if it didn't happen. The light is back on, bright and steady.

I can only think about how fucked up this guy is. About what I might do to him. About how long I would be willing to wait for the right opportunity to teach him about consequences.

“So then . . . shall I ready the contract?” he says. “The one where you step out of your designs and stick the others into them? I bet your wheels are already turning about the possibilities.”

I push myself back upright in the chair. “I can be warden?”

He looks back at me with those holes for eyes. “We're all be rats in your maze. Make us pay in the way you think we deserve to. We'll run your corridors, Leo,” he says looking toward the door. “I'm only asking for a head start before you come looking for me. That's what she showed me on her screen of the future—all the beings I dragged down here following behind me looking for any crack in my actions to pull me back

down. It's gonna happen. I got a lot of cracks to mend. I'm only looking for a head start, for a chance to start mending some."

"So that stuff about what happens when the warden job is over. That's for real?" I ask.

"Did it feel real?"

"Yeah," I say. "Where're my other options. If you get them, I want some too."

"But what about the pleasure of *now*," he says, smiling. "You get to be warden, Leo!"

I shake my head. "Are you trying to help me, or would you rather I fell again?"

He presses his lips together. "That's a good question, Leo. To tell you the truth, I brought you here so I can get out. That's how I start changing *my* future—by passing along information. Instead of trapping guys like you, I'm helping you understand your options. So I can get out of here. There," he says looking at the ceiling, "I said it." He takes a deep breath and takes off his tie and slaps it down on the table.

"Now I've got to actually step away. It's harder than it seems. To give credit where credit's due: *she* was the one that showed me that before I can go, I need to stop first. That corporation can help you through some screens and into some pleasant worlds, but even they don't have a screen to the future like she does." He leans closer to me and enfolds his hands. "She showed me my future—my designs don't get me out any more than yours do. They just bury us both deeper. The results of my actions, gave me only pathetically narrow choices. In order to get another human life, I would be raped as a boy again. Those were my only next-life designs available. Can you imagine? Just when I make it right, it starts all over."

"You made it right?" I ask.

“With you and Vanessa. In the dorm room. You think she is innocent? That she’s never been some twisted individual? Once upon a time she was lacking some of her better qualities. Let me tell you. I was on the wrong end of it. And once upon a time you had a go at me too. You sick fuck. Why do you think I hate you? You’re all rapists and murderers if we go back far enough. Try sitting through that movie.

“These things never end. They go and go if you let them—I know because I let them. Take that whisper in your ear on the loveseat—instead of us all coming back to even like I expected, I got double karma. I got a share in your fall, and I got a share in her suffering. This stuff adds up fast. She called my designs “problematic,” because looking forward, they didn’t solve anything. We’ve all been going back and forth like this for lifetimes, but—” he takes another deep breath. “The important thing here is that she was willing to help me despite what I did to her. I’m willing to help you despite what you did to me. And she’s willing to help you despite what you did to her.” He draws a spiral with his finger on the table. “What we’ve set in motion in time wants to keep moving this way. But if we want to spiral up, to change direction, she says, this is what we have to do.” He reverses the direction of his spiral. “Counter-clockwise,” he says. “I’m going the other way now. She told me that we’ve got to fight and claw for any bit of goodness, because that’s the only way we are going to open new doors. We can’t even see those new doors right now. Take my helping you. It’s changing my future. She showed me that too. Maybe I will take a short and painful life of disease, but I’ll have more options in the lifetime after that. Important thing to me was getting a break from the abuse—both sides of it. I’m opening that new door to my future by helping you.”

He gives a pained smile and starts walking toward the door. “So that’s that. I got my deal, and maybe you’ll get yours. You’re a lucky case—one where the warden quits right in the middle of his job.” He turns back, squaring his wide shoulders to look at me.

“But know this: don’t start thinking I’m a nice guy. If I had figured out originally that she was going to help you as a caveat to my getting reassigned, I might have tried to get out of this. But now that it’s done, I should be the first to admit—counter-clockwise is better for everybody.” He slams the door behind him and it bounces back open on its broken strike.

And there’s Vanessa in the doorway.

She clasps her hands in front of her waist in a yellow sundress with orange flowers. I try to imagine her in a past life as someone terrible. How does it feel to have that person inside? Or is that person long gone? I try to imagine myself as a man who had never harmed her. Or I at least try to imagine a man in me that is capable of more noble aims.

She’s not speaking, but I can read her mind. If you’re going to do it, now is the time, she tells me.

But what about what I did? Is it fair? I ask her. Do I really deserve other options?

What about what he did to both of us? she says. What about what I once did to him?

Is it fair not to suffer?

Fair or not, she tells me, if you decide that it’s time to stop—that it’s time to get out—then it’s time.

Leo: The First Death

I’m back on the train, watching doorway after doorway open on the window screen in front of me. I watch them open. I watch them close. Someday I’ll have to step through one, but Vanessa and I decided I should wait for a better option. That’s all I needed to hear. If someone told me that as a kid, I wouldn’t have listened. But these days I have a

sense of where the doorways go, and the skill to not step into them. Couple of trips into the city to meditate are still paying dividends. If I didn't have that experience, I wouldn't have known what Vanessa was talking about. Who knows, one day I might catch up to that forest monk and say thanks. Since I helped pay for his plane fare to come back to teach in the city, does that mean I get to see him again one day? Maybe somewhere? I don't know if it works exactly like that, but it might.

The next entrance on the screen is from one of my jobs—a few brick pillars and walls to sweep the eye up a driveway toward their charming waterfront estate. I could be born there? No thanks. Listen, I get it: I definitely feel the power heading up to this place. I'm sure I would be provided for, by some decent people. But no thanks. I'd throw it away for the same things that got me in trouble in the first place. Next door that appears on the window screen is that nondescript stainless steel back kitchen door of McBride's. All I got to do is that special knock and I'll have drugs for a lifetime. That's a tougher one, but I can see all the rooms that come along with it. It's a dark place, and it gets darker. Again, no thanks.

My job is to get off these lines—to help myself and maybe others to find the open doors. Listen, a better option is always right there, a doorway we're not seeing. I guess I fell through enough of the wrong ones to know. Maybe I'm here to make a positive out of a lot I did wrong. When you gotta fall from the train, you gotta fall—but even then you got choices.

I've said it before: as long as I've been living, I've been dying at each step along the way—so I should know. And I got time riding the lines now to reflect, to watch the old movies of myself on the screens. Guess I'm preparing for my next death by scoping out the trap doors I've left myself from the lives before. The next memory opens with one

of those composite doors of our Long Island colonial with the pane glass window and I'm home. The first death of my last life.

The first death I see is Santa Claus's, but it's not what you're thinking. I killed him. That much I remember. Or at least I chased him away.

He walks through the front door right on cue, on Christmas eve, as my Uncle Eddy. He stomps down into the den, his puffy-faced smile dropping as fast as the sack of toys on his shoulder when he finally sees me—or the skeleton I have become, laying on that ratty old brown sofa. Starvation can have a sobering effect on people. When you can't eat, you stop looking so hot. What does he want from me?

My parents tell him that Christmas is on hold. We've already been to the doctor and now it's time for the hospital. I'll always remember those days as guilt on top of pain. That's what Christmas brought me every time it came back. The world spotted me seven years before it started taking body parts away right in time for the holidays. Why does a seven-year-old deserve that?

My brother and sister sit on top of the stairs. "I don't think Santa's going to come tonight," my mom calls up to them. Some kids figure out how to separate fairy tales from the real world on their own. For us, the realization is forced on us at the same moment: Santa doesn't exist when you are in this much pain. He doesn't exist when you are dying, or when you might be dying. At these moments, Santa's got nothing left to give you, so he ceases to exist. In these moments, it's your turn to give back, even when all you got left to give is pain.

I can see the look my sister shoots my brother as I'm leaving—shut up, it says, just shut up, before you think about opening your mouth, just shut up—and there's no conversation. There's just me, the Santa killer, being taken away from my new bed on the

sofa, supported by Dad and Mom so that I don't crack in two on the short walk to the back door. We stop so my dad can squeeze my pale life-deprived body into a nylon jacket. My mind and body swim.

I spent three of the last four days either in the bathroom or rolling around on the couch in agony. At first it was a lot like the flu, but then it got worse until finally, I couldn't stand up straight. Is it that hard for parents to gauge a kid's illness? Like when is this not normal? Now. With the nylon jacket on. With the overnight bag in my father's hand. This is the start of something not-normal.

My guts went from bloating to eating themselves to the first stages of self-decomposition in the last five days. At least that's what the doc says. "Now, Leo," he tells me, "we're a little concerned whenever there is a potential rupture, a break, in that area." He holds his hand over my belly. "This might sound strange," he continues, "but only *some* of what you eat can be used by your body. If you hold onto the rest, it's poison."

Within the next five hours of tests, the feeling and the diagnosis will match—eating is not that simple, it's gonna kill you sooner or later. Now what kinda thing is that to tell a seven-year-old? You can't just eat in this world?

They wheel me back and forth for x-rays, then blood tests. Then instead of bedtime stories and sleep, it's needles all night while I lay in bed. The tubes are what I can still feel. They think I am out of strength, but then they wake another part of me. It takes three, then four, then six people to hold me down and shove plastic down my throat—one person per limb and two to feed me plastic. That's right, nearly a person for every year of my life. Fuck them. I squeeze every pipe and duct and tunnel in my body as they hold me to the bed, shoving the tube down my throat as I thrash my head. I scream until I can see the sound twist their faces. They remove the tube from my throat and finally, a man with

round glasses places a mask over my face, and a slight breeze drifts up my nose and sweeps through my mouth as I pant. “Shhhh,” he says patting my shoulder, “breathe in a normal way.” I am still pinned, so I try to incinerate him with my eyes. What the fuck is normal?

They find some kinda rupture. I go through surgery all night and sleep through the next day. They give me a 50/50 shot. Then I am in another room. The doc is talking something about a kinked garden hose, and how they had taken the damage out. Seven feet of damage. But I am only four feet tall. How does that work? With the feeding tube and an eight-inch incision in my belly, they’d say they’ll keep me together. There is a woman behind the doctor with the largest bags around her eyes I have ever seen, but still she smiles at me.

My mother. She was so young.

Her eyes are red, her perm, matted. It’s hard to even recognize her.

“Some kid’s bodies just do this,” the doc tells me. “We don’t know why. The body eats itself. It turns inside out. We don’t know why.” I would get better, he says—*probably*, he should say if he is honest—but not without time. Not without pain. He writes on his clipboard.

“Now, be brave, ok,” he says. “You might have to be here a while. It’s like a sleepover. It’s like being in a different house. Every house has different rules. Ok? Some things will have to change. We’ll talk. But get some rest first.” And then he leaves the room.

My dad seems to step out of the back wall. I fight to keep my eyes open as he puts his face next to mine and sobs. I’d never seen him cry. I know then I am in trouble.

There is pressure inside. Flash-fuses going off. The words septic and antibiotics. I am sedated, ordered not to eat for a month. T.V. to distract me, as the drip line feeds me through my arm. Or at least that's what they *say*. But I know the truth. Food feels different. You don't eat through your arm. It doesn't count. I hold my forearm up when no one is looking and watch the bones roll around each other as I rotate my palm. I do this repeatedly when they leave for a meal, or when they fall asleep.

"Is it ok that we leave, for an hour, maybe two?" my mom pleads.

"Yeah," I say. "Yeah." I count the scars on my arm. I hold contests: how many more blue dots than red? How many veins still unused? How can I preserve them when the nurse comes? How many bruises?

It takes two weeks before I can walk down the hallway for the first time. My whole damn family walks along like it's a miracle. I cry because every muscle in my body is "atrophied." I am a walking collection of dried rubber bands. I tighten my body around the incision. I lean over to protect the wound. Pain shoots more deeply through my intestines. The walk pauses. I try harder. Each step feels like I am tearing bone from ligament, ligament from muscle, muscle from skin. My organs are a type of fused concrete with no space between them. I avoid eye contact and walk, my upper lip peeled back in a grimace.

I don't want to walk, but the nurses insist. I concentrate on each step. I don't notice that my gown is open along my skeleton ass. There isn't enough to tie the gown to, and there aren't any gowns small enough. There was bound to be a gap. I don't notice how it billows. Just nudge the walker a few inches at a time, scrunch up my face and cry. I stop walking. From behind us down the hall, some kid my age points out my exposed frame to his brother—my camel's hoof of an ass. They laugh together like this is my

clown trick. Ha! I catch my brother's eyes boring into them as their mother shuffles them off.

My family is too tired. No one says a word. My family forgave such slights almost instantly, and I didn't have energy to worry about them. In our month together in the ICU we were too close to death to bother.

The world comes back to me, weeks later. I'm living on the drip plus the flavored ice, but it does nothing for my stomach. That's when the kid with no hair is on the playroom floor again, his back resting against a sofa chair. His father is reading in a corner as he eats a box of raisins, one delectable morsel at a time. He seems to roll the dried fruit around his tongue, even sucks on it before he finally bites down, letting that black juice drip down his throat. The picture on the *Sun-Maid* box looks a lot like my mother, offering a basket of fruit, so at first I just crawl over for a closer look, my I.V. on wheels dragging after me. I hand him a wooden block, and as the kid without hair assesses it, I reach for the raisins. Our eyes meet just as I take hold of the red and yellow box. He grimaces and tries to pull the box backward, grunting ever so slightly. I can see each thin striation of muscle in my forearm. There's hardly anything there. But somehow, I am still stronger. Or my will is.

There are agreements and then there are compromises—the tearing of the box belonged to the later. I put my body between the raisins and the bald boy, as the raisins spill across the floor. But it's not just raisins, there are three new boys that come tumbling out too. They turn around and sit facing me. They almost look alike, but one's black hair is a little curlier, and another's ears stick out more. The one with the ears scratches his cheek.

“Well,” the one with longer hair says raising his hands, “what are you waiting for?”

In silence, I grab the largest clusters of raisins first and shove them in my mouth, and snatch more until only seconds later the floor is again clean. The boy without hair just sits there, staring at his raisins, still too shocked to cry. I chew madly, grinding the raisins into pulp. The boy guards the last few tight in his fist. I choke down that black pulp, and slurp that sweet ecstasy of juice, and the three boys that almost look alike return my smile.

I refuse to remember when the nurse asks me if I have eaten. Even an hour later—when the doc comes racing to my bed to examine the stomach pump full of what could be blood or black bile—I am sure I haven’t eaten a thing. “Nope,” I tell them. They diagnose blood rising from the small intestine. They ask again in between theories. “No,” I say. “No. No. No.” What would I have eaten? The doctor asks the nurse to make sure there is a room prepped for another exploratory surgery.

“Did you eat something?” Mom asks, falling to her knees. She sobs at my bedside, holding my hand in prayer. One of the three boys is smiling up at me from under the chair at my bedside. He rubs his belly in a large exaggerated circle. A second boy is standing beside him and shushing me with his finger, while the third boy is pushing the second’s hand away from his mouth.

“A raisin,” I finally say.

“How many?” my mom asks, brightening.

I open and cup the palm of my hand she is holding. The second boy juts his head forward and the first boy lets his arms go limp in defeat. A nurse laughs in relief, while the third boy gives me a thumbs up. My mom smiles like we have tricked them. I smile too. Her lip twitches as her cries become a laugh.

It's kinda funny not to die.

Years later, I am at the Forest Dhamma Meditation center in Manhattan to learn how to cope with my addiction, and one week we take a break from the breath practice to try the "raisin meditation." No joke. They teach us to slurp that sweet ecstasy of juice, to *mindfully* swallow that black pulp. As I scanned the smirking faces in the meditation center with a raisin in my hand, I could only think of my mother's face in my hospital room, and those three boys that almost look alike at my bedside. If raisin meditation was gonna save us, I would have been first. I got up and left and vowed to come back only when the forest monk returned.

Man, who do we think we're fooling?

My brother makes a "welcome back" banner at school, out of that computer paper with the holes on the sides. But the homecoming isn't a banner day for me. I can't look up. I walk hunched and twisted, only a week removed from my diet of flavored ice. Now I eat powder mixed with milk. They want me to be normal. They expect me to be well. But it doesn't happen just like that.

We bring the needles home, or they follow me. I am ok with it. Mom or Dad shut the door of my bedroom and ask me to sit on the bed and breathe. They are quiet. We breath together. *Just a little shot in the belly. A shot in the arm.* Everything is taken care of with a few quiet moments and a shiny line of metal we thread carefully into my flesh. The three boys are there too, and as soon as I am injected, they sigh and smile, and close their eyes, and let their bodies go limp against whatever wall or piece of furniture is nearby. Mom smiles and I know the medicine is doing its thing. I join my family for dinner, and bite by bite I start coming back.

Santa comes again in late March, just for me, but I lack appreciation. Uncle Eddy's a good sport. My eyes roll around the room like I am possessed by a poltergeist.

The pain—I now accept—will never stop. We take turns opening presents. I try not to grimace as I bend over to unwrap a gift, ripping between the Santa heads of the paper. I recoil and clutch my side. My mom puts her hand on my shoulder, and I start to cry. My sister has this long face, and my brother puts his half-opened transformer back down on the carpet as I am shuffled off screaming to the can.

“Keep going,” my mother calls to my bro, “just go ahead and open your presents.”

Maybe Mom and I gave up together then. My mother walks us past the Christmas tree, still up almost four months later. “Go ahead without us,” she repeats, and then returns to hold my hand as I sit on the can. I cry. Razors cutting me to pieces. The pain is just part of the healing, they say. I have to eat, but it’s killing me. I go to my bed and Christmas drags on downstairs. I don’t remember the presents ever fully being opened or the decorations being fully taken down. In some ways, it was always Christmas from then on.

I don’t know when the pain got better, or how it changed. I never pulled up those old memory movies to analyze them—had no normal to compare it to. Mostly, I tried *not* to remember. But here I am, finally watching it on the big screen of a train window.

The three boys are never far away. They go to work for me. I hear them in the middle of the night, scoping the house. They stumble through the attic and drop out the exit door in the ceiling outside me room.

“Chocolate fudge-chunk, walnut cookies,” they say, and an image of my mom’s hiding spot appears in my mind. “We know where they ar-are!” they sing.

I step out of bed diligently, and search for treats in the recesses of the cleaning cabinet, or in a box beneath the sofa. I find them this time in the back of the basement closet, under the stairs, behind the boxed Christmas decorations. I sit against a box of

green plastic tree limbs and eat the chocolate fudge-chunk, walnut cookies until they are gone, or until my parents hear me. And they never hear me.

One of the boys keeps the lookout, and others sing me on, their voices dip with the end of the first line “Walnut, chocolate-fudge cookies,” and then rising at the end of the second, “Walnut, chocolate-fudge cook-IES!” I grind those cookies down with pleasure, stuffing one after the next into my mouth as fast as I can, swishing them into a cookie pulp, slurping that sweet brown syrup. We eat until there is only packaging left, and stuff it back into the box of plastic greenery. They give me a round of applause as I stand, and I bow, and I go back to bed.

I catch my parents one morning from the top of the stairs, discussing an empty cookie box in the living room. “I can’t stop him,” my mom tells my father. “He finds everything.” And she’s right. I have my team.

“You can stop *buying* them,” my father offers.

She says nothing and turns away. As she walks past the staircase she catches sight of me out of the corner of her eye. She almost smiles, but after the briefest pause she keeps walking, and I swear in that moment she looks just like the *Sun-Maid* woman on the raisin carton.

She pretends she doesn’t see me, and that’s when I know: they owe me—the world does too—and I have a company to help meet the demand. There are agreements and there are compromises, and this was both. Our Christmas was eternal, because it could never be enough.

Kairos: Day 2, Meeting

I am still in my clothes. I test my vision again, staring at my ceiling in the soft light of morning. After resting, it's only gotten worse. My tunnel is shrinking. Today is no longer about finding a new place to live, it is about finding a doctor.

I sit up in bed and hold my eyes. *You* appear in this first moment I start to feel sorry for myself. You come not as an apparition, but as a morning breeze coming through the window—a simple mental reminder that there were clues in last night's dreams. There are openings everywhere. I won't argue with you. What I call uncertainty, you call possibility. I sit up, ready to hunt the possibility of a new type of opening.

I could just as easily have attributed the voice to myself, but I like the story of you. I like this idea that you will help me get out, that this whole crisis of vision that has brought me out of the desert is good karma in disguise. I thought my meditation would improve more there, but I know better than to consider short-term efforts a failure. I will avoid my past ruts and give you time to work on our options. Whether I like going blind is not important, it's what I do with the clarity I have left. There are truths worth believing in, and this is one I will hold to.

I walk downtown Boulder without delay. It's a quiet Sunday. It's going to be one of those early summer days that brings out the broad hats and sundresses. Somehow, I assume people will read the disappointment on my face to be back, but they smile and fan out between stores or bring blankets to the creek, as if nothing is wrong.

Statistically, they all lost at least one member of their immediate family in the Glob, but that was five years ago. From the sight of them, they have recovered, or were doing a good job of covering it over. They continue their forever task of balancing pleasure and pain—although I wonder if they will reach the level of happiness of five years ago. I wonder if I will. That is what burns. They maintain themselves with picnics,

shopping, fine cheeses with just the right amount of mold. I hop a sky tube from a platform on top of the bank, which carries a handful of sparsely filled cars toward the plains. The trains are already sleeker, faster than when I left. The change seems too quick, or I'm just a man getting older, and society has passed me by while I sat in my hut in the desert.

There is a series of industrial stops first—for workers to make chips or skim the algae farms for the new diesel. After these, I sit alone in my train car. Not many industries are open on a Sunday but healthcare, and we cannot afford healthcare to take a break these days.

The public transportation has obviously improved despite the population dip. The most important industries: farming, technology, fuel, and healthcare, are all located along the sky tube. It is almost as if the government expects the rest of society to fail, or at least they are ready for it to fail.

Fields rush by in alternating yellow corn and green algae. We must be going over 300 miles per hour. I don't feel any friction. Both sides of the train become a white blur as the train enters a building. The train slows, and a band of silver windows at eye level separate, become distinct, and then stop all together as we stop on the platform, looking straight in at stairways in all directions, leading up and down into the building. I can't see the end of the building anywhere.

The windows beside the doors of the train become screens, previewing the corridors of this place labeled "Contact." I pay attention, especially to the arrows that direct me to the front desk check-in. Did I hear of the plans to build this place before I left? Or was it the inevitable child of the tech industry and healthcare once the Glob hit?

The hydraulic doors hiss open. I step out for my exam.

Kairos: Day 2, The Procedure

“Your eyes should be dilated now,” the optometrist says. In the dark room, I can see the traces of his outline as he moves in front of me on his stool. This glow at the edge of his scrubs is supposed to make the patient feel more comfortable, to know where the optometrist is during the procedure. But because of my condition, he simply appears and disappears. Even when directly in front of me, he’s moving in and out of the frames left by his own body.

He tests the range of my periphery with his finger and then views my retina through a microscope. The whole thing takes less than thirty seconds.

“Um hmm,” he says and slides an arm of equipment toward the ceiling. He walks back to the circular walls that enclose us and put his fingers to the switch. “Close your eyes for a second.”

“How’d I do?” I ask, opening my eyes to the mostly empty circular room, the one exit far to the right. Otherwise, it’s just me in a surgical chair, set upright in the center of the room, a small white table with coiled wire of various colors, and a whole slew of equipment ready to be lowered when needed from the ceiling—other machines on extendable arms, a circular track on which a body scanner descends—you name it.

“It’s exactly what I would expect, Kai,” he tells me. “Probably some kind of infection from the desert. I’ll tell you, it’s not someplace I’d send my loved ones.” He leans up against my chair and folds his arms.

I cup my clammy palms together.

“You can’t be too careful these days. If you’re going to go back, at least wait. But really, is it worth it?”

“At least I can grow your own food out there,” I say. “I can meditate.”

He sits back onto his stool “Yes, you feed on whatever comes out of the soil. The problem is, there are impurities in your soil.”

I don’t understand where he’s going.

“So now that you’ve finally come in here,” he continues, “we can let you know what toxins you’ve been propagating. We might even have a course of treatment.”

“But my eyes?” I ask trying to stay relaxed in the chair.

“Yes, we’ll get to that. But I’m asking you to look deeper into the causes here. Otherwise you are just going to come back, and probably in worse shape.”

I cross my legs. What kind of physician withholds information’s so that he can scold you first?

“The Glob is not one of these diseases that’s going to leave us, not entirely,” he says. “And it’s a strange one to boot—the hallucinations don’t help with our diagnoses. Many will see strings around them first—that’s one commonality. For example, one woman recently reported a loss of balance and attributed it to the strings hooking her and pulling her this way and that. Others are even more odd. A gentleman in here earlier claimed his symptoms started after he ate a club sandwich. He claimed his sickness was a result of the chickens and pigs coming back to collect a dept. Several of us take this as proof that the Glob actually starts in the mind. In the case of your perception problems—I’m willing to bet that similarly, it’s a problem with your mind. We also know the strings coalesce in the throat eventually—that’s commonality number two—and of course at some point the victims all stop breathing. We know that too. I’m afraid you can’t get well these days without the help of Contact,” he sighs. “When was your last exam?”

I press my lips together. “You think I have the Glob?”

He scrolls through some information on his PED and clicks something on the device. He smiles at me. If he wants me to see what he is looking at, he would put it up on the big screens—the walls all around us.

“We consider it pre-Glob until we can see the strings moving down your throat,” he says.

“Maybe I should see a doctor?” I say.

“They all became optometrists, Kai. Myself included. I’m trying to tell you, it’s changed. We’re your main support now. Listen. You can’t even fully observe this room. That’s a problem.”

“You do internal medicine?”

“We cover it all.” He taps the side of his PED. “Let’s have a look at our options.”

He slides away from me on his stool to face the bare wall. The center band is a screen that stretches all the way around the wall. He touches it and points of ink appear at evenly placed intervals, until letters turn into words that rapidly come together and fill the square segment with a block of text.

“You’ll be ok,” he waves his hand and a new screen slides over. He continues to read unrecognizable pictograms on the screen—probably Chinese. “Your sequence shows you haven’t totally blown up your last track, but the next part will be an adjustment if you’re going to get your mind back.”

“I thought you said ‘an infection.’ What sequence? What track?”

“Who knows how these things start—just listen.”

“Aren’t you supposed to know?”

The optometrist ignores me, “Probably happened a long time ago and it wasn’t bad enough to notice then. You took care of it the best you could, but it’s done some

damage. It will continue to do some damage. The important thing is what you do now. If it turns into the Glob, you are going to drop fast. We'd rather keep you up here with us."

The longer he talks, the more I realize how little I understand about what type of medicine he practices. It's as if I have these boxes of memory in cold storage and he's opening them one by one, but I get to enter each one only half-way. I can make associations with what I know, but I can't put it all together. Do I have brain damage? He opens a second segment of the screen and it similarly unfurls with script—this time a script more graceful—some kind of Thai or Burmese.

"You're not going to read that whole thing to me, are you?" I ask.

"When you're ready, you'll read it yourself."

"No thanks, I've got bigger problems today."

He drags information from one box into the next until he finds the phrase he is after. He lets his finger navigate across the screen at that line and then hooks his finger at that tail end of that piece of script so that he holds a thread. He steps before a blank screen and flicks the thread with all five fingers at it. The screen blooms into an image of the high peaks, the treeless tops, and then the image disappears as he closes his hand again as if catching something. He walks close to me and places what has become silver and purple-black thread around my wrist. He pauses, watching me. "This will keep your perceptions stable. It will keep you tied to your doctors and out of harm's way. Keep it on and we can keep you here with us."

I turn my wrist over to observe it, trying not to gape at his magic show. That's probably what he wants. It's just a weave of silver and purple-black thread hanging loosely over my wrist. Is this it? Is this what you get without insurance these days?

He reaches down and ties the thread around my wrist. "If it falls off, you'll have to pick up another line. It will just happen; you don't have to pay attention. We'll be watching so you don't have to."

"What if I pay attention," I ask.

"Who knows," he says returning back to the screens. "you might have some weird choices. You might go somewhere our chip won't function. Just leave the jumps between worlds to us. Remember, here your happiness is guaranteed, at least ninety-two percent of the time."

"What do the other eight percent turn into?" I ask.

He shuts the screens down, one by one with a light tap. "You'll never do better," he says.

The acid of panic begins to build in my stomach. I don't believe him. "So you want to chip me?" I ask.

"You are a good candidate. That's all I can say. Next step is up to you."

"So my eyes will work?"

"The eyes?" he asks. "Yes. We'll do this through the eyes."

He reaches over me and swings a metal arm toward me, directing two masses of lenses to circle my eyes. "You came in just in time by the way." He speaks quicker, more what I expect given the gravity of my situation.

"I don't want to be alarmist, but—" he arches lenses over my eyes with a clack-clack, an optic-twirling ninja. "Let's see if we can get on the same page. What color do you see?"

"Brown," I tell him.

"Good. Just in time," he repeats. "We've got to agree on what is a short wavelength, what is a long one, otherwise we'll stop seeing each other. What about now?"

“Red.—Or?” I ask.

“Tissue death is one thing. We can correct for that. Consciousness is an entirely different issue. If it strays . . . if it loses desire to be here completely . . . there’s nothing to assimilate the chip. I don’t know why you stayed away from us as long as you did. But we will find out. Where did you think you were going? Why come back now?”

“White,” I report. “I guess I thought I’d rely on my own eyes.”

“Well, that’s a fantasy these days I’m afraid. But the good news is that it is like trading in the old train systems for the magnetic system, or the vactrains even. Have you been on a vactrain?”

I shake my head.

“It’s a whole new set of rules.” He slides back on his stool to beam at me and spread his arms. “It’s just the start. The internal technology is the real game changer.”

“Chipping?”

“Chipping,” he says.

“Just give me the very basic.”

“Sure, sure, but—hey, you don’t get out much do you?” He grabs my knee and shakes it like an uncle.

“I like to be alone.”

“Well, you’re going to like this—”

“I just want to see—”

“See *what*. See *when*.” He turns back to his PED.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of this. I’m not interested.”

“Well, fortunately it’s a package deal. You’re lucky it’s this way.” He can’t say two sentences without rubbing a screen.

“Well, take the extras out.”

“Out?” Now he stops.

“Out.”

“I’m afraid it doesn’t work that way. You’re confused. If you take the second floor off the first, you’ll have no roof. If you take the basement out from under the first floor—well, you get the idea. You can fade into darkness or work with us. I hope you don’t feel like we’re backing you into a corner.” He looks back toward the wall behind me and then looks back to me and smiles. “We have no corners in here anyway. It’s your choice of course. You have choices.”

“What does it cost? How do I know you’re giving me all the information,” I ask.

“Don’t get paranoid now,” he looks hurt. “There’s no immediate cost.”

“No *immediate*?”

“Listen, we all have our debts.” He touches his chest. “Myself included. Maybe I have too many glitches in my program, but from what I’ve seen, I am probably helping you now because you’ve helped me in the past.”

“Karma,” I say.

He looks toward the door, “It’s better not to use that word,” he says. “It’s like telling a doctor you went to a Chiropractor, herbalist, or acupuncturist back in your day—some doctors get a little funny hearing a word like that. They want hard evidence that these principles work first.”

“I don’t know what you mean. Isn’t there evidence?”

“They . . . we would prefer you just follow your inspiration, the screen’s that is, the *company*’s inspiration. If you just stay connected with the network we’re building, we believe you’ll never have to fall from here. We call the network “the lattice” because it catches you. New names are necessary for functions that are categorically different, don’t you agree?”

I shrug.

“It supports every seed of your desire and allows it to flourish in harmony with everyone else’s desires,” he says. “Soon, the weave will be so strong, it will be the only thing anywhere. We are getting close.”

“So the contract says you’ll come get me if I slip through?”

“Well, we’ll try. Probably several times. In the unlikely case—let me just say that the best protection is in the way you *use* your chip, and on how you interface what you’ve brought with you. It’s really up to you. We provide the inspiration to use, and the lattice by which to use it.”

“So if it’s up to me anyway, what do I need you for?” I ask.

“Well, for one, to see.”

He’s got me there. “Let me ask this: do you give us data charges?” My voice is annoyed, whiny even. Do I really have to pull this information out of him, bit by bit?

“Oh, I see,” he says, “Your paradigm is off. *That* is what is giving you trouble. We don’t care about money. We don’t charge you *money*. It has no value here. Man, you have been away. You have been out *there*. I thought you were asking about debt.”

“I *am*.”

“Well, the debt I mean is that maybe someone will be lost somewhere and you will try to help them, and they will be rude to you to boot, but you’ll help them rebuild their vision anyway.”

“Karmic debt.” I say.

The optometrist laughs. “Fine. Use the word. But don’t tell them I called it that.”

He seems confident, but I’m more confused the longer we speak. Perhaps I do need to come up to speed. “I apologize,” I say quietly, just in case I should be. And, *I didn’t realize you are insane*, another part of my mind adds.

“But don’t worry,” he says cheerfully. This guy doesn’t miss a beat, “we can make any adjustments you like once the chips are in. It’s your own wiring of course; we just add the lens to the optic nerve so-to-speak. You can tune the functionality to your liking. That’s the whole idea.”

“I don’t like the whole idea.” I slide my fingers within each other. They won’t settle. They don’t fit. “I just want to see.”

“You might find that you do like it. In fact, I don’t know anyone who doesn’t.”

“That’s a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you have to be skeptical of these things that people like. Where does it take them?”

“Ok . . . well, Kai, listen—we’re ninety-two percent—”

“Guaranteed,” I interrupt him.

“Listen, I’m going to have to reel you in a little bit. I’m trying to help you function. I’m not just giving you the company lines. You need further orientation than I can provide, obviously.” He stands up in front of me. “Listen, it was great to meet you.”

I don’t understand his expression. I jut my head around like a bird to broaden my visual field, and then I see his extended hand—he’s trying to shake my hand. We shake clumsily. It was extended the whole time.

“I’m confident that we’ve diagnosed the problem correctly and where we go from here is up to you. I’m not trying to keep you from the desert if that’s where you want to go—let me just say that. Dr. Dean will bring you the contract and together you can decide how we proceed.”

Dr. Dean sticks his head into the doorframe. His huge eyes seem to pop out of his round face. The crew cut hair and short white beard only heighten their prominence.

“Wait,” I call to the optometrist as he slips toward his exit. I recognize him now from the Forest Dhamma center. Was he the one who brought medicine for the visiting monks? “Or did I meet you at the raisin meditation?” I blurt out.

He looks at me strangely.

“Well, I’m sure there were other times we spoke. The Forest Dhamma Center, New York City?” I say and see a hint of recognition on his face that he instantly covers over.

He turns away and points his chin out to the hallway. Dr. Dean follows him outside and after a few words they return, Dr. Dean first. “You are just in time,” the optometrist says over Dr. Dean’s shoulder, and then, “Take care Kai. Again, great to meet you.” He walks around Dr. Dean and back to me, and shakes my hand more energetically. “We’ll find you a home.”

I give him my most uncertain smile, and with that, I face Dr. Dean. “Can I have just a couple minutes,” I ask.

“Of course, of course,” he says backpedaling. “I will knock in five.” He holds up five fingers. “Is five good?”

I nod and he closes the door.

I rest my eyes and breathe deeply into my abdomen. There was no mention of what I had to give up—namely, vision independent of satellites, independent of collective memory, independent of floor plans. There was no mention of contact with people as they actually are rather than how I shape them. My head feels fuzzy and I return to breathing. I jump as the lights click off. They deactivate when there is no motion in the room. I start to breathe again. I put my arms to my side and let the tension slide off my fingertips.

Is chipping really that different? What makes an eyeball the perfect perception of reality? Is the information it reports to my brain any more “mine” than what Contact is offering?

Or is it the loss of control I fear? The fact that they could throw an advertisement in front of me at any point in my day—slap a label on an object in someone’s hand, on their shirt. Contact does that once they have your information—how much money you have and where you like to spend it. Or they can throw voices, someone walking in front of me explaining about how excellent a recent meal was, only to find the vendor right around the corner. Contact will bombard me. And it could be a lot more malicious than that for all I know. But even then, don’t I get to decide what to buy? Still, they can fill my days and nights with whatever they chose. Do I trust them with my happiness? Over time I will fall deeper and deeper into the fabricated reality of Contact, where only one thing is certain: my choices are beneficial for their corporation. What will I become? Will I be reduced to a mouth feeding on behalf of the corporation? Would I ever remember what I really want? I need to do whatever will get me beyond the corridors, the rooms, the corporation-controlled spaces. But even out alone in the desert, I had to come back—and even then, my meditation was full of holes. There’s got to be somebody who knows a way out. Could I find the monks in the forest? Were they still there?

I stand and walk through the room, slowly. In the darkness, my hands troll the screens on the wall. They are tacky at first, and then with pressure they change to the texture of moving sand. My hands sink in. I knead my fingers through it and continue walking. My fingers become raveled in a fine thread. Not sand at all. They couldn’t care for a blind man in the forest. I would be too much of a burden. That would be asking too much. I have to get my eyes fixed. So do I let Contact fill my head with these worms?

There is a staccato knock on the door. “Ready for me now?” Dr. Dean calls.

I run back to the chair, in my haste knocking it with my knee and then hobbling as I spin back into a seated position.

“Ready?” he repeats.

“Come on in!” I call, straightening my t-shirt.

The door opens, bringing light from the hallway and Dr. Dean steps back with a PED of his own in hand. He hits the switch on the wall. “Dark in here,” he says. “At least we know you weren’t snooping around,” he chuckles. “Oh,” he says scanning the room stiffly, now in the full light.

There are purple-black threads like broken capillaries protruding through the screen where I had touched it. There is blood on the screen, on my seat, on my pants—I lift my hands to eye-level—on my hands.

“I thought it was ink, or—ah, string,” I stammer.

“Well,” Dr. Dean says thoughtfully, “it’s a little more . . . organic.”

“Am I cut,” I ask, examining my hands.

“No, no, don’t worry. Nothing like that. Capillaries. Veins. Arteries. Just a glitch in the technology. I would not suggest that you take a new body right now.” He walks to the screen.

“Where would I take the bodies?” I ask, alarmed. “Whose bodies do you have?”

“Whoa there,” he says laughing, “a *new* one. Let’s rewind.” He puts his free hand to the screen on the wall and taps it. It glows on and he moves his hand in a counter-clockwise circle. The screen flickers and swallows the broken capillaries. Then the red drops from the floor and seat raise into the air forming a beaded necklace that disappears similarly into the screen.

He turns to me and says, “You’ve got new life here with us, Kai. But please don’t jump ahead. You can leave the technological adjustments to us for now.”

“Where is ‘here?’” I ask.

“We want to bring all the realms together, to see everyone everywhere. You don’t remember what it was like to try to vacation before air travel, but let me tell you, it was hard to get anywhere. It’s been like that for us here, growing Contact. We’re just getting our wings so-to-speak. Don’t you want to see what I’m talking about?”

“See what? Why?”

“So that we can taste more places. Anytime we want. And others can too. A place of complete non-interference, where we get what we want, whenever we want, and everyone one else can too.”

“Maybe they’re not as fun to live in as you think,” I say.

“You don’t have to *live* there. Just visit the floors right above the action,” his voice slows as he raises his hand, “just slightly over . . . their heads.” He smiles. “Hey, you’re with us now,” his voice quickens, “leave the worry to us.”

I look back at my hands and they’re clean.

“No harm done, Kai” he says. “We simply use the rooms available and leave when we’ve had enough.”

This guy is getting into my head. Maybe they’re getting into everyone’s.

“Only the ones who left openings,” he says.

“You heard me think that?” I say, but he does not wait for me to recover. He just dives right in.

“So,” he says, “I overheard a little of your conversation as I was stepping in earlier and you are absolutely right. Anytime you have a one-size-fits-all fix for perception issues you have to question it. So here’s what we can offer. I’m going to build in some extra commands—”

“Can I ask some questions first?” I interrupt.

“Oh, of course! I’m sorry. Fire away.” Dr. Dean closes the door.

“Are there other options between blind and chipped?” I want to get away from this guy, but I also know I might die without his help.

“Just think of it as an enhancer,” he says. “A chip is just a simple interface between what you see outside and the images you already produce internally that naturally accompany thought.” He widens his stance a little. “Let me put it this way,” he says opening both of his palms, “The environment around us leaves a lot to be desired. We all know it. But there’s a lot more happening per square foot these days. That’s all. We can’t count the worlds. Who wants to stick with just vanilla ice cream when you’ve got the full variety flavors at your fingertips? And no, there are only two categories in your case: there is chipped and there is blind.”

“To be honest with you, I’m mostly interested in finding some monks I know in the forest.”

“There are still people trying to live out there?” he says placing the PED on his table between the red and yellow coiled wire.

“I don’t know.” I say looking at the screens, wishing I didn’t reveal my plans to him. “I just need to see where I’m going. And some money.”

“Ok, well, I’m not your mom but I can tell you that from here on out, the only way you are going to see is by signing a contract. Your vision is not going to run itself. The chips will build off the images you produce and project that image externally in a way that functions in the landscape—so you can function.”

“In conjunction with satellites, floor plans, other people’s memories . . .” I add.

“You’ve got it,” Dr. Dean points at me with one hand and reaches back to the table for the blue wire with an electrode attached. “Pretty cool, right?” He places the electrode on my temple until it hooks my skin with its suction, and slaps the other end

against the screen, as it glows to life. “Ok, steady now,” he says wiping his nose. I see thread, falling from his nose and into his napkin.

“Doctor, are you ok? You’re not getting sick?” I turn my head to look closer as he folds up the napkin. Did I just imagine the string?

He just smiles and says, “Picture your last vivid dream.”

“Ok,” I say, and there it is on the screen: water already rushing through the landscape, trees snapping in two, Indians lying half-buried in the earth.

He sneaks a peek at the screen and looks back to me.

I’m impressed. They even know my dreams. “Wow,” I say, but now they know they’ve got me hooked.

“Ok?” he asks, arms out, and then kills the screen. The wall returns to a pale yellow.

“It’s always worked this way anyway,” he crouches onto the stool in front of me. “Now we’re just more aware of the process.”

“That simple?”

“Right. But there’s one big difference once you’re chipped. Once the chip is in you, your mind doesn’t recognize the image as separate. You are *in* the image.”

“Like a dream.”

“Like a dream,” he says.

“Simple enough.”

“Not really,” he smiles. “There are aspects that we don’t completely understand. I can tell you it happens fast. Your mind manipulates the images, clarifies them, and the lens registers the images and projects them back through your wiring. It goes back and forth until—before you’ve even considered it—you not only have shape, color and all the

visual cues, your other senses register it too. It has a scent, a taste, you can touch it. It's real."

"But it's not."

"I guess it depends on your definition." He looks at me with his head to the side, smiling like I am about to get it.

I scratch my face. "So we're the director and the actor at the same time."

"Always were. But now, we're bringing it up to the surface. It's a lot more fun. But, if you like, the interface doesn't have to be all that active. You can run it on the old 4G, so-to-speak, if you like. We don't think you'll want to keep it there, but if you can, just think of it as a tool you might use to add some flavor for now. I bet you'd like to play around with the history functions before you dive into full immersion. We'll keep it on orientation mode for a few days. Expect your life to become better gradually. And then you can make your choice, jump into a body—if you really are that crazy—or come back to us for the latest update and we'll show you some of the new rooms we've found."

"Start with vanilla ice cream."

"Start with some sprinkles too," he stands.

"Right."

"It's going to increase your choices," and his smile says we're done.

"No offense," I say, "but it sounds like you haven't totally figured this out."

"Of course not!" he tells me, "we're not gods. We're geeks. But—" his dramatic pause tells me he's worked on this line before—"in a world where first sight is fading, the geeks are closer to gods than ever."

If they're right and my vision is about to leave me, I'll have to pay their price.

He scratches his beard. "Don't worry," he says. "We'll work with you."

I relax my jaw and my fists. "On the karma payment?"

“Well, that’s a very archaic, unfortunate term, isn’t it? It makes it sound like we are expecting something back from you. We just request access to the chip to see how you use Contact. It helps us create more harmony among users, and to share new worlds as we find them. There are no strings.”

“Except the ones that catch you if you fall,” I remind him.

“Except those,” he laughs.

“But you still don’t catch everyone,” I say.

“No,” he finally relents, “but we are closing the remaining exits every day. We don’t expect that your experience with us will ever lead to another lifetime. Your unfortunate days are as good as over. Where else would you want to go? We have everything. And the lattice is not going to fray.”

“How long has Contact been here?”

“A couple hundred years.”

I look at him.

“Hey, even forever has to be built over time. We are building an extremely reliable system. Don’t take this the wrong way, but has anyone ever told you that you tend toward the negative side?”

I smile.

He sighs like my father used to. “We can work on your perceptions as we integrate you,” he says. “You *could* look at the world through the positive aspects of your situation. And we hope that you will. Think of all your potentials. The information is all there—”

“With the chip it’s there.”

“With the chip you can use what’s there. The worlds are there. You’re just not paying attention to them normally. You’re not able to take full advantage.”

“So the chip will change that.” I try to soften my voice, but there’s no hiding my skepticism.

“Working with the chip will. Working with it will make things much more malleable. It’ll alert you to the choices. It will lean you toward the pleasant side after the interface adjusts, as we get to know our new client. We have to fulfill our side too. We want to make sure you are getting the experience you signed up for.”

“The pleasant side? Is that where I’m going?”

“If you sign a contract, we can arrange that, yes.”

“And more importantly, I can see where I’m going?”

“Of course. Your mind will use what’s left of your eyes as long as they hold out. As your cornea clouds—and it will—as your retina disintegrates—and it will—you won’t even notice. Your mind will choose to work through the chip full-time, long before that happens.”

“It doesn’t sound like a choice.”

“Some choices are too good to resist,” he says. “Coming out of the desert, it might take a little longer. My guess is four days from the time you first came into the range of the lattice, or two days after you officially sign up.” He takes his PED back off the table and moves through a series of taps and swipes and then hands it to me.

He points to the top. “Naturally we can’t list everything, but here are the basic functions: communication, entertainment, built in technical support. It’s a little more for the psychological support, but we hire out for that. We don’t want our customers to think that Contact *causes* psychological issues, so we avoid direct association.”

“But do you?” I ask.

“Cause issues? No more than any computer ever did.” He smiles.

I read to the bottom and click “payment plans.”

“But users can learn how to *use* Contact to improve their happiness,” he continues, “and counseling can be part of that for some clients. So we build in a link, in case you want to make that an additional part of your experience.” He points to a tab labeled “psychological support,” but I don’t go near it.

I look down. It is a simple questionnaire of what time of day I am available. “For periodic adjustments?” I read the explanation on the screen.

“Not the type of plans you were expecting?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“We find—in rare cases—that clients become recalcitrant and resist reporting the information we ask for. So we just require a signature up front.”

“Don’t you already see what we’re doing on these screens?” I look around the room.

“Yes. But there is some information that we don’t have. Like how the experience feels from within your body, for example. But we’ll get to that later.”

I nod. I try to think of other options I might have before I sign the contract, but that part of my mind feels like another blank place.

“The exchange is as minimal as possible, but the technology needs information to improve, and to maintain. So for now, you report experience, to get experience. The satellites are self-functioning as long as they are fed a steady stream of information, and of course there is built-in trouble-shooting that some clients really enjoy taking part in as part of their experience, so we’re covered on all bases. They make sure highways always appear as highways. Though the trains are still a process,” he mumbles. “The second there is a glitch, we let you know so you can be safe and come right in. That’s why the trains come right here. Easy.”

“What is the problem with the trains?” I ask.

“Nothing. Nothing really. We’re trying to get them to stop diving. There are some flavors, some places, we would rather quarantine. We’ve had a few clients get a mouthful of earth—or a mouthful of worse,” he mutters. “We’ve recovered them. Most of them. Some of them. Brought them back up to savor better flavors, no harm done. But it’s troublesome. We’d look forward to making the lattice indestructible—totally reliable. One hundred percent. We aim for no deviation in our enjoyment. A noble goal, wouldn’t you say? We’ve certainly made great strides.”

He claps his hands together before I can answer. “Ok. So that’s a lot of information to process. The Glob might have taken the population down a little, but we’re catching more and more of them and bringing them to a better place. We’re monitoring one hundred million clients on a daily basis. Plus, let’s face it—and please don’t take this as a scare tactic—but walking around blind is not a great idea. There’s so much to see. So much to do. We want that for you.”

I wave the PED toward him. “I guess I’ll make it work. I need to see.”

“Great,” he says, taking his device back. He opens a screen on it, then another, and hands it back to me along with a stylus from his pocket.

“And what if I want out?” I ask, taking them.

“If you want to wander on,” he says. “There was a time we thought that was the only option. It’s what did for so long. But think about what we are offering here, all the flavors you could ever want. A contract to end all contracts. But if you really want temporality, jump for it. We encourage you to do exactly as you please. We just ask that while you are with us, you also honor what we’re asking you for—access to every room that you access through the lattice. You give and you get.”

I sign on the dotted line and he pulls the PED and stylus away. The stylus catches against the silver and purple-black thread tied to my wrist, and reminds me that they're there.

"Ok," I say, scanning the ceiling.

"Can I also get an 'I approve' for the record?" he asks.

"I approve," I say staring at the dome ceiling light. I feel adventurous and light. I needed more options, and now, here they are. It's not like I didn't ask questions. I was thorough. Wasn't I? Or was there a turn that I missed? Are there other options? Is a signature all I am giving up? I rub my wrist.

"I'll teach you some basic commands," he says. "Stay on familiar grounds with the elements so that you don't get lost. When things get fuzzy or hazy, or you get confused, get back to the felt sense of the body. Don't ask or answer questions outside of the elements."

I look at him questioningly.

"I'll show you how it's done. Start with your breath." He turns the wall screen back on and continues. "Where do you feel density?"

The screen shows me in the farmhouse turning in bed.

He looks down to make sure that his PED is recording this. "Where is the heat?" he asks.

There's an image of burning trees on the ridge.

"Interesting," he says, looking again to his own device. "Try to stay *in* the body for me. Felt sense. Where is the coolness?"

The screen shows the divide and the rivers pouring down from the alpine, flooding the whole world.

His body blurs. “How does coolness *feel* in the *body*. The *body*.” His voice is alarmed, his head closer, almost wrapping around me like a photo taken with a fish-eye lens. “Where do you *feel energy*?”

Energy? I think. Energy. The screen is white and Dr. Dean is gone.

The body, I imagine him saying, *the body*.

I lost something. Is it too late to get it back?

Kairos: Day 2, The Contract

Dear Customer: Thank you for choosing Contact.

Here’s what you can expect in your first few days:

If you have experienced a gap in service, our doctors are committed to your reorientation. We recommend that you stay indoors in a familiar environment while your perception adjusts. Here, we encourage you to explore the level of fabrication recommended by your doctor, Dr. Dean, and familiarize yourself with the range of perceptions available. We suggest that you use this time to fine-tune your interface. Contact works with your body’s original chemistry to enhance optimized homeostasis. If you experience feelings of boredom, fatigue, doubt, loneliness, general displeasure, feelings of agitation, confusion, anger, ill will, or worry, simply return to the elements—to the felt sense of the body.

If you find the resulting perception disturbing, you may change it. Adjustments are a necessary part of orientation. Rest assured, mild discomforts, while frequent at first, will not recur thanks to advances in our system. After about a week, adjustments become unnecessary.

If you prefer, you may explore perceptions and memories on a Mindscreen before entering them physically. Our goal is to reconnect you with the most comfortable

surroundings possible while bringing you back to the very highest quality of life.

Monthly upgrades will be provided without charge in line with your feedback. 92% of our customers now report a measurable increase in comfort from one month to the next, even those under contract for several hundred years. We hope that you'll agree:

“It's good to be in Contact. Welcome home.” ™

Kairos: Day 2, Return

I assume I am back on a train. I assume we are moving. The trains are so quiet now, their movement closer to that of a satellite.

A Contact guide has a hand on my shoulder as I nod in and out in my seat. I am now an investment. I am not to touch the silicon skin over my eyes until morning. I could test my new vision then. For now, enough of the evening light moves through the silicon skin so that I can see the outlines of figures on the train. They move like the shades from last night, but more rapidly, and emit light rather than consume it.

I don't say a word. My mind is unwinding and retying frayed ends. I am so tired. The chips are now growing capillaries. They are feeding on me. They are integrating. I have to let them do their work. This is the process of re-orientation. I am not alarmed. I just want my bed, to let the new possibilities integrate with sleep, to fill the dark places with new life.

It does feel like new life. The blank spots were not a symptom of fatigue. They were past indiscretions, the results of bad decisions, openings I was on the brink of falling through. I had seen them first on my old drive across the continent; I had wanted to stay alert. It was somewhere over the sand coral canyons at sunset. I could see them now, their strata of white and beige and Indian-paint red. The sky accelerated as it hit the ground, and light embedded itself straight into the rock, but the pits in between remained

dark. I too am racing back through time, searching my mind for an island—a memory or an impression on which to land.

I see Vanessa, from college, in the next room. She is surrounded by white-lined screens, as if what once were bookshelves have become entrances all around her. Her body glows like the mantle of a lantern. Her hands are empty in her lap.

I wake in a bed, *my* bed I assume. It is the middle of night. It is so dark. There are no shapes but the vaguest outline of what should be my windows and a point of light meandering on my ceiling. Vanessa, I say, how do we get out? Where's the path you are traveling? Will Contact take me your way? I squint at the light until I see traces, then curls, then lines of letters.

Blinded by sensuality
 covered by the net,
 veiled with the veil of craving
 bound by Mara
 like fish in the mouth of a trap,
 they go to aging & death,
 like a milk-drinking calf to its mother.

The room is dark again and the fear again creeps into my chest. I shouldn't have signed up. What will my world be like in the morning? Will I remember the mistakes that brought me here—that even the pleasant places expire? Or will Contact help me to forget, to take away the unnecessary concern that these rooms are endless, that they will never be stable, that their lattice is constantly fraying.

I should wake, to sit and meditate, to review options, to remember, to pull myself together. Instead, I let myself be defeated by the fatigue and drift into restless dream.

I am walking up along the creek, past the first peaks and higher, desperately looking over my shoulder. I would walk to the west, I decide—back to the desert, or to find the forest monks—but I know it's a hopelessly long way. Would the hungry shades

follow me? I know I need to rest soon. Can I bring them along? I find the familiar loop trail on top of the first plateau rising up toward the Great Divide. The snows are still dense in the late spring. Up here it is still winter, but my old boot marks show me the way. I can return here every night. A wanderer lingering in the land he can't let go. It can be my place where I can remember.

"Listen," Vanessa says.

I place a foot. I place another.

"Have you heard about the deer in winter? The ones who eat the bark. It's an old Indian teaching. An observation."

I am careful to step in the footprints. Careful to avoid snow falling into my boots. You are still speaking.

"The deer walk around their territory; the snow falls. They eat the bark off the trees at the edge of a path. They're following their own hoof prints through the snow. They circle slowly as the snow piles up. They continue to strip the bark. They circle; the trees grow bare. They are hungry. They keep tramping their groove, searching. There isn't any bark left. Do you hear me?"

I am concentrating on walking.

"The bark around the path is gone. They don't leave their groove. They stay on the snow-packed circle. And they die. They die.

"Listen," Vanessa says. "Have you heard about the deer in winter? The ones who eat the bark. It's an old Indian teaching . . ."

With each step, I remember the years spent in the small cabin with Isabel in the foothills more vividly. I had been trekking in the mountains for days, then drove into the early hours of night to return. I dropped my pack and crawled into bed exhausted and raw

from the wilderness. Even now, years after, I can still feel Isabel's limbs, searching, collecting me into her sleep. Intertwining me. Suffocating me in her softness.

I feel the familiar panic creeping into my chest, heavy and persistent, as I sit up at 4 am. I search for a place of lightness, or for the spaces in between. But she is out there, perhaps dreaming in this very town. If we could remember only the pleasant side of the things we have lost, would we not just keep going back to them again and again? Are my chips integrating? I open my eyes and stare toward the ceiling.

Isabel, I say. Isabel? Listen to me. Listen. Have you heard about the deer in winter? The ones who eat the tree bark. It's an old Indian teaching. An observation. Are you walking outside? I'm hungry. Are you sleeping? This is not our bed. I'm not in our bed.

"Listen," Vanessa's voice breaks back in. "It's almost morning."

Morning. Who will I be in the morning? All these rooms are giant circles. Here the hunger never ends.

Kairos: Day 3, Driving

In the early morning I roll to my side to soak up what will be the last of the day's coolness. The first clear thought I have is of Isabel, of absence. These thoughts, half-stuck in the vision of dream. I am watching us on the bedroom's ceiling, on what has become a screen. Isabel is sitting on the sofa, hands palm-down on her legs. Her light green eyes are perfectly composed as ever under her red bangs. Red and green, one of the rarest of all combinations. She could never test me by asking, "What color are my eyes," because they are a can't-miss seafoam green. On the screen, I'm leaning back with my arm behind her.

Morning in the farmhouse features a perfectly natural return to equilibrium: one thinks of one's last home, of leaving it more cleanly. I twist my shirt in my hands, as I watch myself reach out with my free hand to grab one of the therapist's pillows with their frilly edges, anticipating.

"Isabel," the therapist is saying, her voice dripping in sweetness. "You had something else. Something you wanted to say?"

Isabel presses her lips together. I want her to say something different this time. In the desert I would picture her face as she looked up in this moment—that button nose, a few freckles—and wonder how a face so kind, so flawless, could inflict such pain. Somehow I already know. I watch myself pull my arm back.

"Yes," she says to the therapist, searching for authority, finality. This was no discussion. She leans forward and looks at me. "I'm . . . I'm not going with you," she says. "My family is here. But you should go to the desert. You've always wanted to. You should go." She sits up and ties her hair back. As an invisible wall goes up between us. She was done.

Suppressed rage hardens my face all over again as I watch myself say, "You brought me *here* to say this?" My salt and pepper curly hair is in a halo around my constricted face. I look ugly, deranged. But the image recedes into the ceiling like a shot arrow and I curse myself for presenting this re-play. But if this is the first thing Contact helps me to forget, that's fine. Enough with equating the company of a pleasant person with inner well-being. But if I forget her, I am free to do it over and over again. A perfect test case for Contact. A model employee. What kind of freedom is that, to reconstitute these emotions, over and over? To go nowhere.

Who is going to be satisfied here? No matter how well society recovers, we can only be pacified. People will still continue to age and die. Our loved ones will continue to

forget us. And I *want* to remember that, because if I forget, I'm lost. We assume these moving pictures we live in come from a good place. But the desert had a way of undercutting that: meditation, a meal, walking along the creek before the sun became too hot, whittling the mind's issues down. At least I knew there that I was playing out my own craving.

I still know that I am playing out my craving now. I am living within it. Contact can add all the extra functions it wants. But it needs us more than we need it. Who is providing the material for this experience? We are.

I relax around my throat, and that's where you enter, infusing my extremities with the feeling of rushing water.

You are already calling me back toward the divide. I want to keep my longings formless, but the longer we share space, the longer we weave a new story, the more other options become real. Something about the ease that you bring is already familiar. It is enough balm to finally get out of bed.

I unpack, sliding stubborn wooden drawers from the wall, zipping my body together with jeans and hiding behind a t-shirt with an arrow that jags in a number of directions until pointing off toward my left shoulder. Morning is when the raw emotion of dream can crust over and I can start over. You'd think I was a drinker, but this is a different type of hang over.

One thing is clear: I'm in exile even in my return. This unpacking, and reforming of baggage is not progress. Nothing is coming out in a way it can stay. I will just end up putting things back into bags when I'm well, when I can go back.

You arrive with these thoughts—Vanessa, like oxygen to move me along. You are the hardest to keep track of. I try not to complicate your visit by thinking too much about the day to come. I pack swiftly and breathe into this ease you are surrounding me with. I

will sip you slowly and as far as my weariness finds comfort. I will try not to be bothered by the inconsistency of your presence. It's my fault anyway, associating all feelings of calm with Isabel and on bad days all experiences at all. Especially when I am in town. It's a neat trick that I do, a habit. I'm a magnet for suffering you might say. I know it. I do it anyway. I look around for my jacket, but it's not in my bags or in the wooden drawers. No matter how many times I look. Here I am frazzled in my new life even before the bandages come off.

The bandages.

The thought stops me and I sit on the industrial carpet of the room. I am breathing heavy. The bandages are . . . over my eyes? I put a hand to my head and sure enough there is the cool tackiness of the silicon suctioned on top of it. I try to picture the room in front of me, but now that I know I can't "see" it, everything has become patches of color without depth. It wasn't a problem when I thought I was using my own eyes.

I put my hands to my eyes and search the fake skin with the tips of my fingers. There is a soft spot near the tear duct, right where Dr. Dean said it would be. I puncture the seal with my fingernail and hold a pinch of silicone between my thumb and index finger and tear toward my ear. The young veins connecting to the patches under the eyebrow and bottom eyelid tear—one after the next like thread along a seam. I can see the outline of the bed and the dresser, but I see the room through a dull milky film. I look back and forth until the details come into full focus, somehow even sharper than before. Amazing. So I'm in their world now? Or does this mean I am more in my own head than ever? I don't feel trapped. And I don't feel free of anything. Not yet. What I *do* feel is relief. I have my eyes.

I stand up to look at myself in the old glass framed picture of spruce trees and snow and I see that rounder softer skin around my face I can't get used to. My eyes pop

with a bright white sheen with the pinpricks of blood as an outline along the brow and under the eyeballs which are now somehow rounder. The eyes are the same as they were—a brown iris with a slight yellow band—but something is wrong.

I scramble back to the bandages on the floor and search through the gauze for the skin patches. Finding one, I hold it up closer to my face and see what I fear—eyelashes populate the edges. *My* eyelids. I ripped off my own eyelids.

“Kai?” a voice calls from the doorway.

I turn and there on a screen in the doorway is Dr. Dean.

“I saw a notice that the skin-patches were removed,” he says. “Just making sure all is ok.”

“It’s not ok,” I tell him waving the used silicon.

“Can you see me?” he asks. “Can I get a visual confirmation?”

“I can *see* you,” I tell him. “Can you see *me*?” I walk closer to the screen.

“What’s wrong?”

I point to my eyes. “My eye-lids. I tore my eye-lids off! You shouldn’t send people home. This isn’t an out-patient kind of thing. Look!”

Dr. Dean smiles calmly. “First, please give your approval for us to keep you in this room today.”

“Ok fine. I’ll stay. But my eyes!”

“Is that an ‘I approve’?”

“I approve.” I say.

“Ok thanks. No cause for alarm by the way. Your lids never left your eyes. Go take a look.”

I walk back to the picture frame. The lids are there. I blink. I blink again. Everything works fine. I look down at the pale silicone, shriveled and broken, lying in my hand like a spent seed-pod. No embedded eye-lashes.

“But—”

“That’s why we are here. To make adjustments. Everyone has their own wrinkles that they bring. Some of them are pretty weird. But loss of the eyelids is a fairly common perception.”

“I’m pretty sure—”

He interrupts me, “Touch your eye-lid.”

I do as I’m told. It’s there.

“See,” he says. “There . . . or *not* there. We’re not here to make assertions about ultimate reality. Here one minute, gone the next—that’s the kind of thing we want to minimize.”

“You mean ignore,” I say.

“We’re producing a very stable perception here for you,” he says. “A pleasant one too. We’ll hone it. You’ll get used to how it works. Just be patient. We’ll help you stay in today. Get used to the functions.”

“I was going to take a drive.” I say.

“With Isabel?”

I don’t know what to say. *That’s my business* comes to mind.

“Don’t look so surprised,” he says. “Turn around. Look at the screens.”

There on the south and west windows behind me are various camera shots of Isabel and I driving through the mountains. One is on her, and one on me—with ripples in my forearm on the wheel, and so much younger-looking with that smile. The smile lines are there, but they tell a different story than now. Another shot is on the front of the

car, and the final one is from the perspective of a raven looking down on us from the highway.

“Before you go looking for people, keep in mind they have made new memories since you’ve seen them,” he tells me. “They haven’t been hiding out for years in the desert. They’ve been living their lives. They’ve formed new connections, taken on new burdens. Their experience is stretched. You may not be as big a part as you hope. It is like they can only see you from very far away. Some will have to strain to make you out. Others won’t see you at all. I hate to say it,” he tells me, “You might as well be a ghost here.”

“Well, that’s a shitty thing to wait to tell me,” I say.

“Kairos, it will *improve!*” he looks at me with compassion. “Enjoy your time in today. Rest. There’s plenty of time to swim around your past from the comfort of your room.”

I grab my keys. “I’m not a fan of this room. I should go. Give me a day out there to clear my head, will you?”

He nods his head in an exaggerated motion, down and to the right, like a magician hiding a lady in a box behind him. He looks back up for an instant. “Avoid the southern part of town, will you. It’s been terribly dry out there. It looks like a few fires have sprung up. Six actually. It’s beyond our current capacity to control. You should be ok to the north.”

“I will report back any bugs,” I say. “Can we save further ‘adjustments’ for when I get back?”

He smiles. “Of course.” His image flickers and in between appears the raven’s view of the mountains. I brush at it like a spider web and the screen lowers like a drawbridge. I step onto it and into the hallway and run down the stairs and out the door.

* * *

I drive north and after fifty miles, make a left into the mountains through an old boarded up mining town. At first, I don't think I'd ever driven that way, but then of course there's the coffee shop we stopped at on her 30th birthday after riding through frozen rain and hail on horseback. This was my brilliant gift. The coffee was the best part of that flawed plan and I want it again somehow. I want to hold the coffee after the hail. That moment where the frozen edges of this body dissolve into warmth and kindness. To think that hundreds—thousands?—of these moments existed for us. And now they are at my fingertips. All for what?

What would have been a more meaningful end for us? To have children? To watch one another die with the Glob? That thick mucus hardening as it coated and hardened along our sinuses. Our throat. To be one of those desperate lovers or parents that stuck coat hangers down their loved-one's throat in vein. Or the ones more informed who bought an extra day by taking a hallowed out Bic pen into their children's trachea, keeping the air passage open until it inevitably closed to a wheeze. Maybe if it never became airborne the hospitals could have found a way—they could have at least accepted the patients. But once a simple breeze can carry a family's worst nightmare from one house to another, what then? There were even less available hospital beds in the desert. In Boulder, at least you knew you could get your children's throats suctioned every two weeks. It gave them a chance. Out there it was people dying in waiting rooms, in lines, in open air clinics run by doctor's flown in from Mexico and Canada.

Dr. Dean can adjust my thinking when I get back to the farmhouse, and Contact will patch these holes forever. It's called forgetting—the way of the future. It's called the death of worry at the expense of truth. But what about me? I *want* to worry. I *want to*

remember. I want to drive off a fin of rock in the desert, and I want to let go of that car before it hits the earth. And I want to let go of gravity. Forever.

* * *

I remember the driving: along Green Mountain reservoir, and back to the main corridor, the familiar mountain highway that brought us—and everyone else—to and from home. These drives in her hand-me-down early hybrid crossover were her concession to living near her family. It was one of those hybrids they could never find torque enough for the mountain roads. It had A/C though, something my car was lacking, so I put up with the seats covered in the golden retriever's hair. She still ran the dog to and from doggie-daycare and the vet, or even took her for a walk whenever her parents asked. An air freshener or a vacuum was a waste of time. I always drove and she kept one eye on the speedometer.

It was in those quiet moments on the road that I could let go of my worry. I felt she shared this relief or even held my concern in her eyes, as she placidly watched the landscape. The wilderness surrounded us. This in-between world was our meeting place. I didn't know it at the time, but we were each visualizing opposing destinations. She was thinking of the approaching town. A nice dinner. The quick catch-up on the computer when she returned. I was already thinking about the next trip into the mountains. Her hair was up but unchecked, pouring from the crown of her head like fire. I stole looks at her unchanging expression—the way her mouth rested slightly open like she was always ready to pout, though she rarely did.

The first time I saw her in the charter school's hallway, I thought she was regal. I had to know who the new history teacher was. But years in, it was a question I grew content never answering. We didn't fight. We stayed home a lot. It was simple. It was enough. We were teachers in our routines, still smiling at each other in school, but mostly

working on opposite ends of the building. We shared meals at home, but retreated to work in our separate spaces. But here on the road was freedom—together we *could* turn anywhere, *go* anywhere, and with our next break from school never far off, a potential trip was always around the corner.

* * *

Flashing road signs warn trucks about the grades but still I try to avoid the brakes—70 . . . 80 . . . 90 . . . it can't increase forever, I think. We are conserving a lot of gasoline. We are flying into the broad valley, but only I notice. (The universe is not impressed with the most extreme apathy, to say much less of a man simply holding his feet up over the foot pedals.) I expect her jaw to twitch, but I have broken the threshold. If she had caught me, it's too late now—and she never would allow herself to speak with fear in her voice. I breathe in the landscape. She digs in her purse for an emery board, as if she isn't watching me. As if she is contemplating some words.

At the same time a sensation of *You* appears, a separate and internal awareness of space. For me—for you and I—the sky is somehow more prevalent, more blue, the air clearer, and my chest is a window through which it all passes—unimpeded for a moment, for several moments. Beautiful, and precise. Thank you, I think. It is everything I came out here for. I breathe deeply and let the car roll.

To keep you palpable, I try to attach this feeling, even then, to the presence of Isabel. Of course it doesn't take. The record scratches. It is the first of many misnamings. I'm sorry I shouldn't have . . . but I did it.

“Maybe it's time we got out of town for good,” I say.

“We're always traveling out of town,” she says.

“You know what I mean. Step outside of our comfort zone and live a little closer to the edges.” She knows what I meant. Live in the desert. “I just get . . . sometimes I . . . I don’t know. Don’t you ever feel bombarded in town?”

She keeps her gaze ahead. It is the end of the conversation but I’m not good at taking hints.

“The floods,” I say. “The fires. The town’s not going to last forever. I mean, what if that Glob thing came here. We’d be on our own and totally—”

“Don’t,” she says. “Don’t be an alarmist.”

“It would take the babies first.” I say it almost on impulse. It’s bad. I’m ashamed.

“Don’t you dare,” she says. “Don’t try to take that life away from me.”

“I’m sorry,” I say calmly, but she’s not listening.

She looks out the window, “I will never be enough for you.”

I try to catch her eye. “That’s not what I’m saying. There’s no society that lasts forever,” I say. “You teach history. Tell me there’s no chance that this is going to get bad fast.”

She moves in her seat but won’t look at me. She always thinks I’m crazy when I talk like this.

“Listen,” I try again, “I’d rather have a strong mind, then die with a bunch of stuff. That’s all. There are different types of people in the desert. They’re . . . I don’t know . . . not so fixated by possessions, or by the experiences that are going to leave them anyway. What are we doing here?”

She looks at me with that half-broken expression she has when I push too hard. “I don’t see it like you do,” she says. “I wish,” she pauses. “I wish I had that kind of faith.”

I always felt closest to her when she showed some weakness. I put my hand on her leg and she leans her head against my arm. “I’m not going to just leave you here,” I say. “No surprises. If you want to stay, we’ll stay.”

You slip away, sloughing behind us on the road and then catching a draft like a raven drifting high overhead, your ease lost to me. The vehicle’s glorious momentum fades with the valley floor and I feel normal again. I feel heavy. I can’t simply hold that space, to contribute a simple presence: some conviction, a quiet. I always wanted that skill. Instead I take refuge in myself, and by that I mean in my desires, in my own entitlement to hold onto Isabel.

When she spoke of faith, she was making her claim: “This town is my island. I’m betting it’s at the high point. I’m betting it’s as good as it gets. And I’ll bet my life on that.” Sweetheart, I should have said. Even Niwot knew better. Even Niwot saw the waters were already on their way.

We continue up through Loveland pass, that tunnel that dives through the ski resort along the divide, that strange no-man’s point where water rolls to both coasts.

I say, “I’m starting to see what Niwot’s curse is all about. If I go away, you’ll just pull me back.” She mimes pulling me by a cord and we laugh. There is driving. Just driving. And the nagging realization of what we have already communicated, of the assurances we can never provide each other.

We break through into blinding sunlight at the other end of the tunnel, revealing a sea on either side of brown pine, dead from beetle-kill for miles. I picture those grubs digging their blue-gray fungus-lined tunnels under the bark. I tell Isabel about how climate change is responsible. I was always talking about science—things like how we don’t actually understand heat, although we think we do, and how there is a relationship

between it and how quickly time moves. I detail all the levels that heat is responsible for more rapid decay.

“There’s no life without death,” she says. As if that took care of the problem.

“But you always say life is benevolent,” I say.

She pauses. “Yes,” she says, “Sometimes death can be beautiful too.”

There are mountainsides of dead trees all around us. “It can? Think about what happened right here along the Front Range. Just a hundred and fifty years ago. This is what we do for peace of mind. We slaughter each other. We slaughter ourselves. We never have enough.”

She looks at me, her face lost, her lips twisted. As if I am bringing these things into being by discussing them. It is a little bit heavy. I wasn’t thinking right.

“The curse,” I try to get off the hook, “I guess we’re just left with Niwot’s curse to play out. You and I.” I shrug as we continue back toward town.

“There was never any cause—I mean, there was never any curse,” Isabel’s eyes are fierce. Don’t challenge her on local history. “I don’t know why people say that,” she says. “That’s an urban myth.”

“A rural myth?” I try again, but it is too late for humor.

“Niwot was just a native who wanted his *space*, who wanted to live the way he chose. He didn’t try to convince anyone of anything.” She spits the words and then sits back and crosses her arms.

“Yes,” I laugh, but I am defeated. “Then we agree. We should all go to our spaces. But let’s try not to slaughter each other on the way.”

Her face seems to twitch in the sunlight of a different day. Her eyes grow hard and cold, and turn again to look out of the window. I want to touch her. To reach over the console and place my hand again on her leg and take away her words, to take away mine.

But I can't reach her. I never could. Unraveled from the spool of memory is pure longing, brilliant and separate.

So I drive back to town now alone, down Left Hand Canyon, and back to the farmhouse. I'm ready for my next adjustment. It's dusk. There is a single bulb visible through the bedroom window, hanging from my ceiling. I park outside and walk upstairs. We all pay for our places. And this is the plan I signed up for.

In the darkness, I circle the house and enter through the side garden, half-expecting to find booby traps in the leaves along the way. The decomposing frame of the house reminds me of my childhood fort. As I enter, weaving in to the staircase, it seems like just the number of steps and turns that I once walked to the central room under plywood as a kid. But at the moment I would have ducked down if I were there, I step up. I walk up the stairs to my room.

There are no screens glowing. No man appearing in my doorway. I open the windows so that I can imagine the vast landscape around me beyond town. So that I can breathe in the wilderness. I sit on a towel to separate myself from the floor. I light a candle. I exhale. I inhale. I exhale. Let us agree that it was real, that there is some through-line to all of this, that you were there, Vanessa, that you always have been, that you arrive in cars and bedrooms and open places and those that are closed just the same, and even to people flying through a dying landscape.

"The secret is letting some labels die," you say, suddenly.

I survey the constriction in my body. "Like?"

"'Broken promises.' And 'Unfair.'"

"Oh, the space *between* the knots," I realize. We are a fine and suspended mist, dreaming, but still I find myself longing for the peace of another person, a peace that was never embodied, never as close as it seemed.

I sink into meditation, tracking choices, making adjustments in the breath. I let the images settle. I take refuge in the ones who have gone further, the ones who don't come back. The people who might still be out there in the forest, meditating. When I was young, I thought I would get there on my own. Now that I'm older, I don't even know where they are. Both forward and backward are lost to me here.

It's night when I am done. I blow out the candle and lie down and sleep,

I dream of vines growing up from the earth, up the side of the house into my windows; I dream of loose ends of red string snaking toward me—memories trying to reconnect, or memories unplugging.

You appear—that coolness descending around me, and here we are again, together. The air is sweet like it is in spring, when the lilacs first bloom—that moment when things first begin, when we wake up and start again.

“Let's go someplace less exposed,” you say. “Imagine we are resting in a tree—let it be the center of a world, removed from the spinning.”

Not good enough. Larger systems are still spinning.

“It doesn't matter,” you say. “Stop spinning after your thoughts. Keep going to the center. Consider any spinning as a sign that we have not yet arrived yet. There is someplace I want to show you.”

I dream of altitude and finally climbing over the continental divide. I roll over, my sheets moving like river currents. I dream of not coming back.

Kairos: Day 3, Night

Good evening Kairos. We apologize for the late hour. This is your Contact First Twenty-Four Hour Review. We would like to repeat your doctor's request: Please stay indoors for the time being.

We will ask you to confirm some personal information and then to answer a short series of questions. It will take approximately—*one*—minute.

Please say your customer name now: Kairos Mana

Please say your branch name now: Boulder

Optometrist: Dr. Davidson

Surgeon: Dr. Dean

Approximate number of intentional adjustments: Five?

Wind: Do you mean breath? Two?

Fire images: None. Does anger count?

Water images: Several. Four?

Earth: One? Two.

Suspected number of adjustments by contact: None?

Thank you. Your feedback helps us to improve your senses. We have made the appropriate adjustments.

When the voice quiets, I hear the sirens of that night after my last drive with Isabel.

I watch from my window. The flames make the last mountain ridge before town despite planes dumping retardant all day. I watch them burn for hours while she sleeps. I am ready to flee. Those closer to the mountains are being evacuated, a steady stream of white and yellow headlights weaving down the foothills.

But the flames stay right there, three thousand feet above us—like orange flags, waving a warning before a red moon: “We could, if we want to, you know—we really could.” And they might have. But they don’t. No reason really. They just don’t feel like it, I guess. The right bands aren’t playing this weekend. The view across the plains is fine

right where they are. They scorch the backside of Flagstaff Mountain and leave us to the places we claim as our own.

Fifty miles down I-25, the fire department lifts the warning only to have the wind-swept flames jump two firebreaks and pour into the metropolis of Colorado Springs in a matter of minutes. Hundreds of houses, many the million-dollar variety, vanish overnight. There is nothing to be done. Residents have seconds to grab an armful of belongings. One couple on the front lines are incinerated after being told by a 911 operator that the fire is contained and to go back to sleep.

The flames can come whenever they please. They can sweep across the land as long as they find fuel—timber, houses. The flames can feed on oxygen to leap firebreaks. What can we do?

I look at Isabel, placidly dreaming. What if we pick up our phones and we all dial 9-1-1, just for assurances? What if the 911 operators are better informed this time? Will they report that fire is coming from the west? That fire is also closing in from the east? That fire is blowing down from the north? That fire is also rising up from the south? That the escape routes are closed? Or will they let us wait and find this out for ourselves? Will they tell us nothing is certain, that ageing, illness, and death will inevitably come? Or will they tell us to all go back to sleep?

“Kairos,” Isabel says. “Come back to bed.”

I took that night as our collective vision. Like the shaman’s vision of water the night before Niwot met the whites. The Glob would in fact arrive the next month, and I would leave for the desert. From my attic window that night, the next end felt close enough. If not that night, I knew, another day.

I open a window. I ask *You*: With aging and illness and death approaching, what should we do with our time?

Gas money will only get us to the coast.

And then what? Do you think we can swim it?

You can try. But the elements will come back for what is theirs.

The body?

Even memory. Every room, everywhere.

So where's the escape? Walk there? Or swim? Drive?

Stop thrashing, you say. Stop standing in place.

What does that mean? On the window I see a ferry coming toward me. There is a blond woman with her back to me, before a sea of yellow neon thread. I peer over her shoulder and read:

Overcome by this arrow
 you run in all directions.
 But simply on pulling it out
 you don't run,
 you don't sink.

Vanessa: An Address to Leo, the Boy with String

Dear Leo,

It's time to turn the train in the other direction. To look forward in time instead of backward. Now is the time to make your choices. We are approaching the Great Divide. This option is the tougher one, but please keep it in context. Also pay attention to the next life that piggybacks right after it. It is your choice, but let me tell you the story of how it might go:

Your next mother, Isabel, will listen for your voice at all hours—in the darkness, sleepless eyes searching the ceiling, hoping for you to cry. In truth, during your last year, she will have found satisfaction in any sound—half-hearted moans, or even your once reviled two a.m. siren will be a strange comfort. Nobody will explain how your voice disappears, why your throat seems too narrow and your breath becomes faint. It is as if something invisible were lodged in your trachea.

Isabel will replay in her mind those unusual cries that first night of your illness—those cries that will be your last—the unorthodox rhythm, or the appearance of that rope-like mucus running from your nose.

She takes an orange cloth, and with her first wipe, your head pulls forward as if connected to it. Then: your final scream. Startled, she drops the cloth behind the headboard. You feel the motion of the cloth pull straight at your heart. This is our agreement. This is the beginning of how hunger might begin to be overcome, as you, so young, are separated from the body.

Soundless, you cannot tell her of this feeling: how just now the world slips beyond your control, how your eyes must remain closed to concentrate, how you are locked in an internal conversation with other organs. You wonder, how can it be that this night, the very moment you see the heart as a spool of string, it begins to unravel? Clearly as a child knows when a kite is wrest from his hands, you know then that the body has lost containment—that flesh cannot help but spill back to the world, but there is also the hope that you might rise from it.

See her now carrying your frail toddler body in a sling through town, hoping that this exposure to the outside air might return words to your lips, or vibrancy to your eyes. See her full of hope when you already know you are leaving—so many in the neighborhood have died. Children first. Pressed into her breast, still you sense the dizzy

streets, beings in motion along sidewalks expecting to be home for dinner, expecting to find their path there clear. “Excuse me. Pardon me.” The people walk down the street.

They push by one another with force. You are carried between them, plunging into a fever-dream where you are one of the many gannets from the classic *National Geographic* film your mother has played for you over and over. Like the birds, you plunge, as you visit any number of past lives, where you feasted on the weak, on any advantage, on every scrap of food you felt you needed, choking down every slime-ridden scale that you could catch in your beak—the money, the drugs, the woman who said yes, and the ones who said no. But that’s not you now. Your mind is not fused to hunger. It is watching. It is waiting for an opening. Your mind is stronger than your past misdeeds and you refuse to fall—you vow there will not be a return to their ways, to the familiar gravity of past folly.

In your fever-vision, the bird-people continue to dive—soundlessly and feasting—you watch through the graying vision of your now half-closed eyes. The mackerel-people scatter and reorganize in resistance. They watch you in suspicion as you bounce and stare from your mother’s shoulder. The fish are ripped toward their unwitting destinations, a trail of string falling from their mouths as if they were being pulled this way and that. It is true, you realize. Those not eaten will die in the tangle of the world, dragged about by haphazard hooks, baited with every shape of craving. The mackerel-people spin in tighter and tighter circles, hooked and drowning, pulling against each other as the web of string constricts around them.

Mom, home. Home Mom. But you do not fully believe in its safety. You remain silent at her shoulder, head to one side, your expression one she will not recognize. Your focus keeps the whirl of your spool quiet. *You* keep it quiet. You keep it from adding thread to the mess.

The hospital prescribes antibiotics. The doctor says, if only you change your eating. *For a month. Maybe two. Sleep here.* A nurse feeds a plastic line to your arm. *This will nourish you.* You recognize the repetition between lifetimes. What have you done to be back here? Does it matter? You are as hungry as last time. You vow to do everything not to continue this cycle. You are more hungry for it to stop.

You live off memories and impressions from weeks ago—the last time your vision was clear, a memory of wholeness—when you lay alone in your bedroom, sticking to your sheets in the balmy summer night. Light had come through your open door, the shape of the hallway window narrowing as it streaked across his ceiling and disappeared—the lights of cars rolling past from the distant hillside.

Winter is coming next. The same hospital bed as last life. Every child gets only one night. A single night of help. The ill are too many. The hospital is maximizing resources. The darkness of your vision is now total. You hear words like “needles.” “Vacuum.” “German blood tests pending.” “Body emaciated.”

The town sleeps.

Wake up.

You can’t call or push a button. Someone has left a window open. It adds to the pressure of your center where the diaphragm stiffens, a pressure like ribs folding in. You are used to the silence, but not this whirl of your spool—the sound, the licking out, the feeling of a world closing behind you. The beeping heart beat monitor fades in the background and the light from the hallway dims. The heart expands to fill the surface of your skin, to fragment so that it might occupy all corners of your loom-body. The neon orange fibers whisper as they emerge from your pores. The tiny neon threads wave, buoyant as if underwater, and you begin to weave them around your body: a blanket of light. You think *stretch*, and the blanket covers your body in its warm comfort. As the

ends combine around you, they glow like the mantle of a lantern. You feel a different type of fullness. You sit up. You leave the body to your I.V.

You move down the marble stairs and through the lobby and outside. You stand warm in your blanket under the winter's second full moon. You are a cool fire. Light settles between the skeleton trees, illuminating the spaces until each blade of the hospital lawn seems to glow. Your day has come. Your body is out of string, your spool-heart now a mere blanket, your carriage.

You drift down the hill, through a forest and across the frozen stream on an old wooden bridge. Before you cross, you leave your blanket to the dead earth. It has fulfilled its purpose. You will trade it for a new one. You have left the territory, beyond the map of town.

Once three days passes, your mom, Isabel, organizes your things. She moves about your room bagging and sorting, dusting and cleaning and then breaks down crying upon your bed. Behind the headboard she will find that first cloth, that scrap of orange, that she dropped in alarm. Her stomach will plunge with the memory. The pattern of the fine silk-like weave seems to rise in three dimensions. As she thinks again of you, it clarifies as a simple frayed square made up of a series of squares, which too are made of still smaller squares, receding like endless rooms. As she moves past the window, the cloth shimmers in the light.

She walks outside, across the lawn, and down along the river to the bank among the willow trees. Under the dappled afternoon sun, she holds the fabric high as if it were a window to the sky. She looks up through the trees and into the sky and thinks of you as she rubs the cloth between her thumb and forefinger as if divining your path—*Don't*, she says to herself, *too late*—and it unravels, single threads fall feather-like to the earth

where they disappear into the soil. She sweeps her hand across the ground, detecting only grass, stones, and dead flowers.

In your absence, she will cry. She will sense the repetition of her gesture—as if right now a mother upstream has also touched the earth and cried for her child. And as sure as rivers fill lakes as they flow downstream, she will also sense the gesture as it continues, until there is no place on land that mothers' tears do not touch. She touches the earth once more, for all time, for each mother she has ever been.

Something changes that day in her perception and her grief is not the same. In her free time, she makes garments and tents for neighbors who wish to travel, to press on, in places like the desert, where the Glob has already run its course. When conversation turns to your passing, she will explain how some strings form a tether to the heart, and how some unfurl at the right time—her boy that knew how to let go.

She will pick up the phone to tell Kairos. To finally tell your father that he had a son, but the number has been disconnected. Kairos crashed in the canyons eight months before.

It was a gorgeous sunny day near Upper Calf Creek, between Escalante and Capital Reef. The two-lane road narrowed while he drove up a fin of rock. He was thinking of how today was the day he would again risk calling Isabel. He was touching the phone with his hand as he rehearsed how he would make contact from the next motel. He imagined her explanations for leaving. Or would she accuse him of doing the same? He lost track of his speed. The road jumped down, and to the left, and his car's right tire slipped beside the broken asphalt, and then the left, skidding off the red dirt.

From your black room, you watch your parents where you first met them, along the divide—just above the high-mountain scrub forest the beetle-kill has not yet reached. You're watching Isabel: a stranger at that moment, a half-naked hiker entwined with

Kairos behind boulders. She is looking into the sky, straight into your eyes. “It’s ok,” she is saying, “I am safe.”

An eddy forms around you, and losing gravity you list into its opening. Into those words you are born. I will wait for you, Leo, again at the divide, where your two years on earth will pass in a half-hour conversation for me. And after your childhood death you can return here, to be born again along with so many other children, lost in the Glob. You will help show them the doors. From the divide you all will jump.

Your faces will be composed, your gazes inward. Of that, we are proud. You allow the first impression of a body to form around you. Not someone else’s body, not *my* body, just a “body,” and you let those arms and legs pour out of you, rushing behind you, spinning softly in galaxies of fire—spitting stardust that trails your path through space. You are splitting from your light, as a thrown torch leaves behind its flame.

All the way through the deva worlds, you weave in and out of each other’s trail, leaving behind the formless beings to their bliss, past the cornflower blue devas or the silver ones, those wearing red or orange, those steeped in yellow or purple-black. You fall past the Devas Corrupted by Fun. You slip past the Devas Who Delight in Creation, those who will reach out to you on the earth, to contact you through the strings of their lattice. Or they will follow after you, looking for new employees. Their screens have all your favorite flavors, places where the Asuras wait too—just waiting to slip a phrase through that hooks you. The Yakkas in mountain glens and caves, the Gandhabbas—those teenagers on their skateboards, or serenading you as you fall—wonder how you have plunged to the human plane. That you have made a choice, none of them can fathom—to be born, to come back to practice your own final unraveling, some of you falling to earth here and others there—in silence, in anonymity, whispering to your

mother in the tundra, in the jungle, in the suburban home: “We are here. For the last time. We are here.”

Kairos: Day 4, The Climb

Isabel and I had climbed half-way up this waterfall. It was dangerous, but the only path. She did it with a grimace and only after a deep breath. The trail was like it is now, ragged peaks on all sides. The way we came from was an obvious and open part of the route—it would have been a simple retreat. She must have felt this strongly. She was constantly gazing back over her shoulder, fearful of the climb, and angry that I had not anticipated it. I must have been pressing to get out with her more than I realized in the weeks prior. Past the slick climb, she walked with a sense of obligation, with a haste to get it over with.

I try to stay as close as possible to *You* as we again start our ascent. I focus on my breath, and there *You* are, helping to sweep energy across my body, to untangle the knots of my thoughts. Each time I re-focus though, my thoughts again pull me away. My eyes are open, so my concentration is harder to maintain. Contact will not fix this. If I don’t report the problem, they will never know. If I tell them, they will build a work-around or patch the instability with new code. Their fix will never hold. *You* are teaching me something else, or trying to remind me of something I once knew. As your cool presence fades, my restlessness again returns. I press on, through these columbines, the buttercups, the purple miniature dust brooms lining the river labyrinth. Isabel had paused to make a bouquet right there, but we agreed to leave them for the way back—we were only a mile or two in.

The trick was to follow water. It led us in deeper, even when the trail faltered. Isabel kept walking because there was no obvious place to turn around. There was Long

Lake and its view of the upper spiral—Shoshoni and Pawnee peaks connected by a long saddle and lit from our left in the mid-day sun. For a moment, Isabel forgot her fear and looked back with a smile.

“Something, aren’t they?” I asked.

It appeared that the next turn would be the last, the inner chamber of rock and water, arrival at that highest of these glacial lakes with sheer cliffs on all sides. The end. But no. Isabel and I could not perceive that the rock was not continuous—only when approached directly could it be seen in relief, could it be circumvented, and passed between. The rock was actually many rocks of varying distance, opening as a series of gates when approached. We walked the narrowing glacial valley like a spiraling staircase, ascending toward the clouds.

She must have seen the determination in my face. I was going to find the last pool resting out there, so she pressed along the tundra grass, her jaw muscle twitching. To her, the journey must have seemed arduous, but we had only gained a thousand feet. But finally, Lake Isabel was worth it—of course—we sat where the trail left us, in a boulder field patched with meadow. In my mountain euphoria I took in the scree fields pouring down to the west and south, and she handed me one of her club sandwiches—with extra cheese and pickle.

“The lake is named after you,” I pointed out.

“It’s perfect,” she said.

I look at the image of her again now, and I see her smiling because it was over. We were fed and she could return. I didn’t realize that I was torn between two worlds that did not overlap.

I rolled up next to her, beside a boulder in the sun, in our own secluded meadow. The grass was low and soft, and buffeted with moss. She lay willingly, content that this would be the last of the afternoon sacrifices.

“I don’t have protection,” I said, already pressed against her, my head in the crook of her neck.

“It’s ok,” she told me. “I’m safe.”

“Unless your timing’s changed,” I said.

“I know my body,” she said, running her fingers through my hair. “Trust me, ok?”

I undressed her hurriedly in case more hikers were en route. I put my arms around her and the wind swept down from the tree-less rock scramble and craggy peaks above us. She closed her eyes under the intensity of the sun. I should have felt comfort, but no matter how I pressed her body into the earth, her eyes remained focused on the sky.

“Quickly,” she said.

We put ourselves back together and she stuffed my jacket into her pack, smiling and ready to head back.

I sat up, into the wind, and listened. I wanted something. I needed to go.

I didn’t know if *You* were with me then, but someone was already helping me imagine alternatives. If those days were so good, why were they never enough? Why did I have to repeat them, adjust them, make them better?

Isabel was perfect in her structure, in her bones, her blood, her heat, and her day-to-day calm making her way through the town. I wasn’t ready to admit it, but the days were on loan, and they didn’t extend into the forest. No matter which way I grasped them, they turned, became other, slipped from me.

The shuffle of boots came from an unexpected direction—up between the piles of scree and boulders. He smiled, something like a trail-weary version of myself. The vision immediately gnawed at me. My face turned into a question.

“Are you stopping here?” he asked.

“I didn’t know the trail continued,” I tailed off.

He pointed along the ground and up the scree field. He described a lake, turquoise from the glacial silt, a scramble, and then the saddle of the divide, where waters flowed to either end of the continent. He encouraged us to climb and then continued down.

She looked at my face. “No,” she said.

In the face of an either/or, I hesitated. I wanted both.

“Just wait,” I said, “wait?” hoping my smile would make it ok. Her face showed despair, a loss of air in her lungs. I took it as manipulation.

I climbed and climbed—toward where I rest now—past another waterfall and steep boulder fields, interspersed with snow and ice of the glacier.

I look up, now, at the last and steepest climb to the saddle and feel my earlier self, twisting back to her, descending with a gnawing feeling in his gut. The divide was not a mere sprint away. The last climb would take care and time.

That day ended right here with nothing. I realized my mistake too late. I had been gone only ten minutes, but the rock encircling me felt as if it was slipping, that it would crash down on all sides if I did not descend. I turned. I raced back. Surely she would be waiting. But when I reached the boulder field and meadow by Lake Isabel, she was not there.

Light caught my arrowhead sitting atop a boulder. It must have dropped out of my pocket and onto the grass. Isabel had placed it where she knew I would see it—but without assuming the burden of returning it with her own hand. My stomach dropped as

if I were spinning into open water. Her message was clear. We had left each other at altitude. We would now live with those choices.

I returned to the quartz point, and placed my hand around it. Was it you, Vanessa—even then—who left it pointing back west? I didn't finish the climb as the point divined, but continued to descend, even though I sensed I would not catch Isabel.

The signs were everywhere. There was the sudden blinding of a snow patch, with pock-marked finger-size holes. I knelt in helpless curiosity. A fly or beetle laid at the bottom of each hole. The movement of each insect, or maybe its heat, had melted each body a finger's length down—into pock-marked isolation chambers—shriveled and dead in the light of the midday sun.

I don't remember the rest of that afternoon, how I discovered that she drove away or how long it was before she removed her things from the cabin. The separation was in fact weeks later, but to me the thread between us was always cut that day. Our end was two decisions made at altitude, and mine more tangled—I could not move forward; I could not get back. My choice resonated daily thereafter and in the recurring dream of that place:

I am offered birth along the Great Divide. But I climb back down the alpine valley instead, to scramble back to the place of my life before. The watercourse refuses to be found and it becomes late. In desperation, I climb a gnarled grandmother aspen, scramble atop a strange netting over the trees, a netting invaded by delicate vine-like branches. I take hold of it knot by knot, but keep falling through the lattice. I struggle to pull myself back through to the top surface. Unsteady, I make my way across the top of the waves mirroring those of the earth's surface—these giant and sweeping mountains before the divide. My scramble is slow and cautious, and as the first stars appear, frigid air descends. I realize I have given her my jacket.

The purple and yellow core of the aspen seed cylinders are surrounded by a pure white down, which burn under the moon like thousands of filaments. The sky is filled with these lanterns, and with every breeze, they twinkle like phytoplankton rising to the surface of the sea. As I stumble, they brush my feet and hands and fall, glistening for a moment, and then disappearing onto the forest floor. I have destroyed everything I had stitched together for the climb—the entire threaded tapestry of simple pleasures crashes and I make my way back to town like an animal searching through the tangled underbrush.

I emerge in the canyon and climb up on the red rock fin. I track the gridlines of the town's feeble lights as they blink, as they funnel into highways, as they dim completely—until the only lights are from solitary cars vanishing into darkness.

On the last plateau beside the glacial lake now, I can see the route of that old journey back. I turn to see the saddle and the twelve hundred steps remaining. I look up at Neva Peak and South Arapaho over 13,000 feet. Someone has even kicked steps into the snow, all the way up. A narrow corridor, but perfectly reachable.

I sit first on a plateau in the sun, sheltered by a crown of rock, and take a short rest. The valley pulls at me with a vague nostalgia, and as I look back I smell honey and sage. At this altitude, I can imagine myself as one of the radiant gods in my mother's anthology, but unlike those gods I also remember that the next taste is never enough. A taste just opens a world around you—a new place to open your mouth and fill your stomach. The taste hooks you to a line that pulls you on and on.

The massive rivers and lakes of the west all begin here—a trickle of melting snow and ice percolating downhill. My eyes follow, catching every shimmer of light—on

each wet stone, where rivulets collide, where streams move through the trees. I imagine the rivers born here at the divide—those that travel to find the ocean, or to the west, through canyons, or east across plains. I imagine those that run like the arteries of this body too, diverging into capillaries, into skin and flesh and organs. The body is alive to sensation and space. To gravity below.

I watch the waters everywhere fall into recesses, the contours of land that entrap and pool—all those lakes I have visited, each with a familiar name. I turn, taking short steps upward through the snow. I can feel those vines from town too, snaking up the valley to grab me. I keep moving to break their pull. I stay with the felt sense of the body—the solidity, the heat, the coolness. I focus on my breath—the energy is coursing through my limbs, heavy and full from the climb, and connect the bones in my feet to the earth. Contact will never know what this feels like.

As I pick my way up to the saddle, through snow and rock, there *You* are, a face to match the voice. Vanessa. She is waiting for me, now, leaning against a doorframe of rock separating the east from the west. The jeans are a surprise. She hasn't changed since college. I knew her from the university, and then from the meditation group in the city. Of course it's her. I didn't know her long. We didn't speak that often, but somehow it makes sense that she's been helping.

I make the final steps looking across the cloud bank that sweeps around us. All I can see is Neva Peak to the left in an otherwise white world of snow and cloud.

"Nice view," I say.

"Just wait," she says, still looking to the west, her golden hair blowing across her face.

I sit across from her on a rock and rest for a few moments in silence. "Well, Vanessa," I finally say, "at least we won't sink up here."

She tucks her hair around her ear and smiles at me. She points to the rock under my right hand. There are fossils of fish right there, overlapping one another. I can see the outline of their bodies, where their eyes were, their skeletons, and especially their spines.

“We’re just getting started,” she says. “Don’t be confused. This is just another place.” Her eyes are even more intent than how I remember them. “But if you’re ready to choose, it’s the *right* place. I can show you the options.”

“Another contract?” I ask.

“Every *body* comes with a contract,” she says. “But you can help write it. Which threads from your past can we weave with? Which ones can we work around for now?”

“Am I dead?”

“It’s only been a handful of days since you drove your car off into the canyons. You saw a road where there wasn’t one. As common a mistake as they come.”

“So, it’s still two thousand-something down there? Is Isabel alive?”

“Earth years race by when we’re up here. It’s 2160 on earth. Four days here is a couple of lifetimes down there. She’s lived several full lives. Rather pleasant lives. You can join her if you like.”

“No,” I say. She is not waiting for an explanation, but my mouth is already saying it: “I can’t breathe under water. No one can. I can only hold my breath for so long.” My shoulders rise and fall in the thin air. “I’m not going to fight as the world suffocates. I want to get out. Don’t we ever get out?”

“If you walk the path that leads out. But it’s your choice how far you want to follow it. You can pretend this right here is your daydream and keep staring at your farmhouse ceiling—trade your perceptions to Contact for more pleasure, and live inside their worlds for a time. But you’ll be back with the hungry shades when their system crashes.”

The rock doorframe reminds me of an open train door. “I keep seeing myself in windows, in screens,” I say. “I’m sailing above red rock fins under the blue sky. I am in my car, floating across the West over this ancient seabed. But I keep dying before I make it across.”

“We’re always dying, Kairos.”

“So the dead get processed by Contact?”

“The dead go lots of places where they feel very much alive. Some might say they are reborn. Some move between screens, others between trains, others keep driving their cars. But there are limits. In most of the very pleasant places, old memories are superfluous. You might think the pleasant places are eternal, but they’re not. Without warning, you’ll stumble through a screen and into some terrible location. It is an up and down affair. But there are also places to build a mental stability that gives a greater reward. Take those that climb to the amphitheater,” she says.

“That’s where we are,” I remember. “We call this the amphitheater.”

“Your opportunity to be more meticulous in your choices, where you view rebirth options. Nice choice of the scenery,” she says, again looking west. “Do you see a path you’d like to travel?”

“No,” I say. “I see clouds.”

“Maybe you’re tired of building worlds, Kairos. Maybe you’ve had enough. But don’t let it turn into a path of destruction.”

“I would never—” I start to defend myself.

“No, you wouldn’t look to harm someone else. When the frustration builds from not getting what you want, you take your image out of every screen. You blind yourself to where you’ve been. I’d say you’re approaching such a place. You like to snuff out the memories across lifetimes. It’s ambitious, but leads nowhere. It doesn’t get you out.

When you finally arrive at ground zero, when your old traces are all gone, you'll turn the other way again and look for a more stable world to inhabit. This is your pattern. Contact will be there for you. But by the time you come back to them, you'll already have forgotten that what they offer is fleeting. You've been wandering into their corridors for a long time. In between many other lifetimes.

"So what should I remember?"

"I can't offer the pleasures of Contact," she says, "or the pleasures of your own destruction, but I can offer a third option."

"You found a way out?" I ask.

"So have you. There are those in the forest who don't fight for their food," she says. "You once knew some of them in India, in China, and again in Cambodia. Maybe you'd like to practice with the forest monks again. Many are living right here. They've crossed the Pacific some time ago now."

"You knew them too?"

"I still do. It isn't an easy birth to find. So I'm going to take it while I can. Maybe you climbed up at the right time to follow."

"Can I go?" I ask. "Where was your opening?" And I breathe and I listen.

I just listen.

"I reflected on the elements," she says, "of this strange conglomerate of physicality.

"How one day a wind will rip down this slope and scatter the downtown structures across the plains like broken straw. We that have stayed will float upward, weightless and together for an instant, and then die alone, tossed like field mice and half-buried in dirt, as the remaining breeze settles.

“I reflected that if we are spared in basements or shelters, it is only to drown in the coming sea, moving over the land to comfort us like a blanket—‘There, shhhh, there’—bringing silence, stripping us of our weight, these cumbersome bodies bloated and purple. The sea will lower us back to the earth as it dries, fish beside us in the last puddles, gulping for want of oxygen. Together we will be parched and dried to jerky for any scavenger to eat.

“Of course, I thought, the fires may come first, sweeping through towns, consuming timber houses and flesh alike.”

“You designed that experience for them?” I ask.

“For whom?”

“For Contact.”

“Oh, no,” she says. “Contact doesn’t have a use for thoughts like that.”

I look at her. “But I’ve thought like this. I’ve lived this too.”

“Like I said, you’ve forgotten too much. So you keep learning the obvious all over again. It’s up to you to separate it all out—which thoughts lead into entanglement? Which will lead you out? If you’ve felt hemmed in, it is because you’ve been doing the hemming. Some of us help as best we can, but Contact is totally deluded. They won’t suspend you long, before the lattice crashes. Remember, you only get the help you earned. You only get the guides you deserve.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“I say it every time,” she says.

“I’m ready” I say as the next cloud bank rolls over us.

“Do you have anything that is pulling you back from the jump? Anything tying you here?”

For a moment I am still, and then I remember the silver and purple-black string that the doctor tied on during my exam. The one I had met at the Forest Dhamma Center. “I’m supposed to wait until it falls off,” I say.

“Or you could remove it yourself. You’ve got hands.”

I grasp the string with three fingers and pull down as it digs into my wrist, but it doesn’t break. I pull the arrowhead out of my pocket instead, and pull the string taught. I work the arrowhead against the string and then stop. I point the arrowhead west, and drag it against the string once more. The string snaps. This is where I can pick up a new line. The thread untangles, and drops to the snow, snaking downhill between stones, changing into rivulets of water that head back east down into the valley.

“Did you say there was a path?” I ask.

Vanessa opens an old scroll on a rock in front of me and lifts out two pieces of thread—one yellow and one orange—unraveling a poem from the page as I read it. I have read these words before:

the body lies thrown away
 senseless
 a meal for others
 that's the way it goes:
 form is like a glob of foam
 feeling, a bubble
 perception, a mirage
 fabrications, a banana tree
 consciousness, a magic trick—
 an idiot's babbling.
 it's said to be
 a murderer



yet still we reach for new
 skin, burning as it flies
 we fall backwards
 over the divide,
 paper mache spirits

return to the timber-world—
 a self-consumption,
 a fading definition that
 remakes itself
 through craving we travel,
 we land, and
 alight once again

The poem has become two strings reflecting in the sunlight. She twists them together, allowing the valley to blur in the distance. I watch as if this is my whole world. I hold out my wrist and she ties it on.

“To confirm your intention,” she says.

When I look up—across the vast expanse from where I climbed, back east at civilization—there is no civilization. There is ocean water as far as I can see.

“Time,” she says. “It keeps passing. The world has changed again.” Vanessa puts her hand on my back and turns me toward the west. The clouds have cleared. The Front Range is a series of islands where the tops of the high peaks remain, mostly to the south. We are on one of those islands.

“But—” I say.

“This way,” she says.

I look at the waters lashing against the new higher base of the mountains and out beyond toward where the desert canyons were.

“All of our plans for this place have failed,” she says. “We all had them.”

Where the water meets the mountain far below, there is a bay that looks just like that east coast bay from childhood. There’s a shack that might be a boathouse, and a wiry man with black hair, and what could be a tire tube in his arm. I can’t tell if he’s waving, but for a moment his arm seems to be gesturing for me to follow. But this time, I’m heading a different way.

Through the doorway of rock there lies a ribbon, undulating like water, as if it were lying there all along. It forms a path through the sky. Clouds now move back around it, billowing up from underneath until there is just the glimmering path coursing out through a sea of clouds. Copulas appear in the distance. There is a beautiful and distant city at the end of the path. Sunlight passes right through it, as if it is made out of air. My shoulders fall as I exhale.

“Your time is up, Kairos,” she says. “You’re going to have to go somewhere.”

“I thought I was getting out,” I say.

“You’re getting closer,” she says. “Just watch your next step. There are some roads worth staying on. This one takes time. So take it. Take the time.”

Kairos: Rebirth

The blank spots are a symptom of fatigue. I am on my old drive across a continent; I need to stay alert. It has been years and I don’t want to miss any part. I don’t blink, from ocean, through desert, the canyons, the mountains, the plains.

I am somewhere over the sand coral canyons at sunset. Here the earth, in layers of white and beige and Indian-paint red, lifts itself like a palm, fingers extending toward the horizon—remnants of when the earth broke in Southern Utah and emptied the Great Basin into the Gulf of Mexico, when half of the earth ran downstream in a rush, leaving gaps and new canyon spaces in shadow. The sun and canyons are reenacting this cataclysm, as the reds meet the blues. Light seems to emerge from the rock as the sky hits the ground. I too am racing back through time, searching my mind for solid parts—a memory on which to land.

I turn the quartz arrowhead toward the west to confirm my decision. The road slips from underneath my tires, like the road is a ribbon, and time slows down—as it

always does at this moment. I smell burnt sugar, and I can see the cottonwood seed clearly, in the middle of white tufts now pouring through the open windows. It is as if my car has launched into your room, and at the apex of my flight, I climb to stand in my driver's side window, looking down as the rock fin becomes a ribbon beside me. I am almost through to the next room.

I look back through the open sun roof, and you are seated in my now red passenger seat. I still have one question: are you coming? You smile and nod up at me through the open roof. I turn and step toward the ribbon, the path cutting through time, and I let go of the car; I let go of the window. I let go of gravity.

Vanessa: Group Jump

I stand on a chair by an open a window. There are flames flashing along every side of the tower. I survey the building between plumes of smoke—slick metal and glass, and a ribbon leading through the sky. Along the path I see Leo in orange robes, opening his bowl lid, and Kai beside him placing sandwiches and a box of raisins into his bowl.

I hear Jules on the hillside beside us, asking, "How can you just go?"

"Jules," I say, "how can you ask me to stay?"

Dozens of us step out of the window and onto the ribbon—farmers, and traders, teachers, and former guides. We hold our weight in our toes and touch our tongues to the palates and hold ourselves in suspension for a last moment to set our intention for the next birth. We jump.

In the beginning, there are waves hardening to a crystalline crust. There are the white-hot stars of night above. We delight in our return. But now we know more, we remember more, and we know the trades that lay in store do not come easy. Below us

now are open holes in space toward density, narrow eddies awaiting each one of us, old tunnel-threads that we pull ourselves out of, by weaving them into a path.

Jules: Return

The clouds sit below us like a sea in storm, but up here it is a bluebird spring day on the slopes. I look over my shoulder, alone on the chairlift, as the wind rises and falls and the clouds roll and crash into one another. The blue chairs behind me appear ghost-like out of the clouds.

“Hey lil’ sister. You going to raise that bar or what?” Ryan calls from the top station.

I look back up the top of the hill at him smiling at me. His big smile makes me laugh. He always gets such a kick out of me. I miss being loved the way only Ryan loved me.

I’m still seven or eight chairs from the terminal. I’m transfixed by the way the chairs rattle around the terminal, and I track them to their return, dropping back into the grayness of the cloudbank. Nobody is on the chairs, but then it might just be that we are coming up on the four o’clock last run of the day. Perhaps some are jumping on now, thousands of feet below us. But really, I don’t know; it’s hard to tell above the weather.

“Hey! Jules! Raise the damn bar!” Ryan says, standing in the dismount area.

My head snaps back to him. My cue should have been that the terminal booth is also empty, and that I don’t recall the lift up, or who else had come skiing today, or what my age is. Seventeen. No. Sixteen. I know that. I think. But I also know I hadn’t been sixteen in a long time. I certainly wasn’t seventeen here, because seventeen didn’t feel like this. Seventeen my diaphragm got all twisted up with grief. If I felt this good at seventeen, I would immediately think of my dead brother and start to cry. But Ryan isn’t

dead here. The world hasn't lost its intrigue. And the clouds look like something fantastic, something I should dive into at great speeds.

I pull up on the lift bar, but it stays locked in place. Ryan looks up at me from the top of the exit ramp, and now he just looks annoyed. At first I think he is on a boat, pulling up the traps, but then I see he's wearing his snowboarding bib pants with his hands on his hips.

I look down at my skis and take them off the bar and raise it. I push off as the cage arrives at the top and push myself toward him on purpose so that we collide. We tumble, laughing and onto the snow.

"Where are all the lobsters?" I ask him on the ground. The snow is freezing and under my blouse and jeans.

"I threw them back," he says.

"Don't throw me back, ok?"

"Ok," he says, and laughs. "Well, that was insane. Where to?"

"I feel so much better up here, with you," I say.

"You took it all pretty hard," he says.

"Do you think you would do any better?"

"Let's see," he says.

We brush ourselves off and look down the slopes of the mountain back east and down into the clouds. There are flags of yellow and orange, blue and silver, purple-black and blue, lining the slope. Behind the flags, crowds of beings ring cowbells and hold banners advertising cities to live in, food to eat, and offer t-shirts with potential names for us to assume.

"Well," he asks, "should we dive into it again?"

"What else would we do?" I ask. "What other choices would we have?"

RASA, BECOMING, AND THE BUDDHIST NOVEL

I. Introduction: Creating a World through Buddhist *Kāvya*

The Unravelers is a novel of literary fiction that follows in a long but largely lost tradition of ancient Buddhist stories. These ancient stories educated the reader as to what type of unskillful karma (action) leads to suffering and stress, and what type of skillful karma leads to skillful states of mind capable of ending suffering and stress entirely. The early Buddhist stories also aimed to inspire their reader by depicting the rewards and benefits of creating skillful karma, that of developing the actions that make up the noble eightfold path.

The literary basis of *The Unravelers* consists of the stories and teachings that are likely the earliest extant in Buddhist literature: those found in the *Pāli* Canon, especially those books that can be categorized as ancient Indian *kāvya* literature. According to A.K. Warder, author of *Indian Kāvya Literature* Volumes 1-8 (1972-2011), *kāvya*, meaning “literature as a form of art,” (vol. I X) arose in India between the 5th century BCE and the 2nd century BCE (Warder, vol. I 5), its rise coinciding with the founding of Buddhism. Unfortunately, most early *kāvya* literature did not survive past the 4th century BCE. The early tradition of *kāvya* fiction was almost entirely lost and only a few notable Buddhist literary works of this style survive. Still, there are sufficient existent notes on *kāvya* literary theory and strong *kāvya* examples preserved both in the *Pāli* Canon, such as the *Udāna*, a hybrid collection of poetry and prose collected between the 5th and 2nd century BCE, and in the work of the post-canonical 1st century CE poet-monk, Aśvaghoṣa. What remains is enough to provide a foundational study in order to modernize aspects of traditional Buddhist *kāvya* and adapt it into the form of a contemporary Buddhist novel.

The *Sutta Piṭaka* (discourses) from the *Pāli* Canon are a five-part text preserved first in ancient India by Mainstream Indian Buddhism, and today through its last

remaining school, Theravāda, largely in South East Asia and Sri Lanka. Since there are sometimes discrepancies between how contemporary Theravāda teachers use and teach Buddhist concepts—especially in North America and Europe—and how the concepts are used and described in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon, the *suttas* have been given precedence and are considered authoritative for the purpose of writing *The Unravelers*. Similarly, the later Buddhist texts and teachers of the Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions conflict with the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon and were therefore also deemed less irrelevant to the project.

In the same way that early Buddhist *kāvya* literature pushed against the cultural norms existing in India at the time, *The Unravelers* too conveys what are still counter-cultural early Buddhist values, this time to those in North America and Europe. *The Unravelers* continues the themes of the early Buddhist *kāvyas*, encouraging a trade of those common and temporary forms of happiness inherited from culture for more lasting forms that need to be developed in their place—such as generosity, virtue, concentration—in order to eventually lead to release. To be true to early Buddhist teachings, the narrative structure of any Buddhist *kāvya* must be consistent with the teleological nature of those teachings. In other words, the stories should supply the motivation for the practice of the Buddhist path and offer alternative perceptions for the reader to apply to the world around them. For example, early Buddhist *kāvyas* highlight the drawbacks of remaining fixated by sensuality and the related customs of ordinary society. They present the rewards of developing dispassion, celebrating the successes of the Buddha and his disciples in the eradication of the internal sources of greed, aversion, and delusion.

Those who transcribed, wrote, or organized traditional Buddhist *kāvyas* were practitioners within the early Buddhist traditions and in most cases, probably monks. These texts and stories were then preserved over thousands of years by the *saṅgha* and by

lay people who regarded the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon as essential to the Buddhist tradition, and the *kāvya*s of Aśvaghoṣa as a significant narrative complement that remained mostly consistent with the teachings in the *suttas*.

My approach to writing *The Unravelers* was based on the specific Buddhist concepts from the *suttas* that are particularly relevant to the process of creating a fictional world—namely, *saṅkhāra* (fabrication) and *bhava* (becoming)—and on the literary theory of *kāvya* that developed in India contemporary with the founding of Buddhism, which had an immense impact on how early Buddhist texts were composed (fabricated) and read (entered into).

The *Pāli* Canon's *Samyutta Nikāya* 12:2 *An Analysis of Dependent Co-Arising* lists the causal factors that lead to birth and then the “entire mass of stress and suffering” (88).¹ Dependent co-arising is the Buddha's complex explanation for how causality works. The list of causal factors begins with ignorance of how each individual creates stress and suffering, and then from ignorance comes fabrications. It is then from fabrications that consciousness arises (88). The fact that fabrication comes before consciousness is notable because this means that dependent co-arising teaches that we create a world of experience before we are even conscious of it. Therefore, the Buddhist path requires that one bring these processes to the surface, to learn to fabricate with knowledge in all activities—including writing and reading—in order to lessen and eventually eliminate the causes of stress and suffering.

¹ Thānissaro Bhikkhu's translations of the *Sutta Piṭaka* from the *Pāli* Canon are the ones cited throughout this essay. His four volume collection, *Handful of Leaves* (2014-15) cover the first four *nikāyas*: *Digha Nikāya*, *Majjhima Nikāya*, *Samyutta Nikāya*, and *Ānguttara Nikāya*. His translations of the fifth collection, the *Khuddaka Nikāya*, are published as individual books of translation, which include the *Udāna*, *Dhammapada*, the *Sutta Nipāta* the *Theragāthā* & *Therīgāthā*, and the *Itivuttaka*. Bhikkhu Bodhi's *sutta* translations were not used since he translates certain terms central to my project, such as *bhava*, in ways that sometimes obscure important aspects of their meaning or application in meditation (see footnote 3).

Samyutta Nikāya 12:2 further describes fabrication² as belonging to three types: “bodily fabrications, verbal fabrications, mental fabrications” (89). In *Majjhima Nikāya* 44 the nun Dhammadinnā explains these three types of fabrications in more detail to Visākha the lay follower, saying, “In-&-out breaths are bodily [because] these are things tied up with the body . . . Having first directed one’s thoughts and made an evaluation, one then breaks out into speech. That’s why directed thought & evaluation are verbal fabrications,” and finally she explains, “[p]erceptions & feelings are mental [because] these are things tied up with the mind” (240). When Visākha reports her words to the Buddha, he backs her analysis saying, “If you had asked me those things, I would have answered you in the same way she did” (242).

The nuances of how each individual intentionally shapes the present moment (i.e. creates karma) through the three activities of fabrication is beyond the scope of this essay. However, because dependent co-arising teaches that acts of fabrication condition every experience of the world, we can say fabrication also underlies the act of writing and reading. When writing, images and perceptions (mental fabrications) of a potential fictional world are held in mind for long enough for the mind to direct its thinking to the image and to begin to evaluate it (verbal fabrications) until a world comes into being. The act of reading includes the same above fabrications as writing, but is obviously also reliant on the worlds and words as set out by the writer. Reading is also shaped by the desires of the reader. Fabrication is discussed more fully in relation to writing at the end of this section and in relation to reading near the beginning of section IV.

² In the *suttas*, fabrication (*saṅkāra*) appears in more specific contexts than I will cover in this essay. Bhikkhu Anālayo, in his entry “Saṅkāra,” in the *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* lists them as: “(1) as the fourth of the five aggregates (*khandha*); (2) as the second link in the twelve-fold formula of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*), and (3) as anything conditioned” (732).

The second concept that is relevant to the process of creating a fictional world is becoming. Becoming is a central factor within dependent co-arising because it results directly from craving and clinging (the second noble truth) while it also immediately precedes the factor of birth (part of the first noble truth). Although becoming is nowhere defined in the *Pāli* Canon, according to Buddhist monk and *Pāli* translator Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's note on *Anguttara Nikāya* 3:77 *Becoming*, it is an activity of the mind that the historic Buddha uses in "contexts [which] suggests that it means a sense of identity in a particular world of experience" (72).

When the nun Dhammadinnā is asked by Visākha in the previously mentioned *Majjhima Nikāya* 44, "Which origination of self-identification is described by the Blessed One?" she explains, "The craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensual pleasure, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming" (237). In summary, the act of becoming—taking on an "identity in a particular world of experience"—begins with craving for three types of becoming and results in birth.

Becoming itself is classed in *Samyutta Nikāya* 12:2 as belonging to three types: "sensual becoming, form becoming, and formless becoming" (89). The result of these three levels have corollaries to birth in various worlds of right concentration practice (the four *jhānas*, which are discussed in section V's "The Elements as Appropriate Attention") and also to physical birth within form realms depicted in *The Unravelers* such as the hungry ghost, human, and the Devas Who Delight in Creation; and beyond that, various realms of form and formlessness. What this means is that becoming is functioning on both a micro and a macro scale. On the micro scale, in addition to states of concentration, becoming creates momentary worlds such as emotion, or *bhāva*, while on

the macro scale, at death, becoming carries each being from the world of one lifetime into the next (*Āṅguttara Nikāya* 4.123; *Dīgha Nikāya* 15).

In his book *The Paradox of Becoming*, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu details how becoming occurs on several levels simultaneously, writing, “one of the distinctive features of the Buddha’s use of the notion of becoming is the ease with which he shifts the context of the term from the cosmological to the psychological and back” (14).³ In other words, Our creation of seemingly mundane everyday psychological states—fashioned out of how we breathe, think, and perceive the world—create patterns that influence becoming on a larger scale (such as taking birth in a new location).⁴ Conversely, beliefs about the realm into which one is born (as well as the limitations contained therein) will influence a

³ Other translations of *bhava* in the *suttas* are less successful at capturing the ongoing world-building that the translation of “becoming” is able to convey. In his classic, *Life of Buddha: According to the Pāli Canon* (1972), Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli translates *bhava* with the more static term, “being” (25). Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu notes that he translates *bhava* as becoming rather than “being” because, “It’s a type of being that follows on doing, a doing in anticipation of what comes next” (*Paradox of Becoming* 14). In his *Perspectives on Satipaṭṭhāna* (2013), Bhikkhu Anālayo also translates *bhava* as “becoming” (123).

Within his book, *In the Buddha’s Words: An Anthology of Discourses from the Pāli Canon* (2005), Bhikkhu Bodhi translates *bhava* as “existence” (215, 328). Bhikkhu Bodhi provides an end note that explains *bhava* as more dynamic than even his translation implies, writing that within dependent co-arising *bhava* “signifies both the planes of rebirth and the types of kamma that produce rebirth on those planes” (446). Becoming covers these two sides of *bhava* better than “existence.”

The Buddha actually uses a different term, *atthitā*, which Bhikkhu Bodhi also translates as “existence.” As opposed to translating *bhava* as existence, it is common practice to translate *atthitā* as existence. One place where *atthitā* appears in the *suttas* is when the Buddha encourages his disciples to avoid asking questions or holding views in terms of the existence or non-existence of the world. One example is in *Samyutta Nikāya* 12:15, where Bhikkhu Bodhi translates the Buddha as saying, “But for one who sees the origin of the world as it really is with correct wisdom, there is no idea of nonexistence . . . no idea of existence in regard to that world” (356-57). These extremes are put aside. Instead the Buddha instructs that the world should be viewed as the process of dependent co-arising—his definition of right view in the above *sutta*.

Whereas ultimate assertions about *atthitā*, “existence,” are put aside by the Buddha, *bhava*, on the other hand, as a factor in dependent co-arising, is *part* of right view. In the *suttas*, *bhava* is both part of the problem of suffering and part of the path of practice to get out (through concentration practice). Therefore, the processes of world-building implied by *bhava* are better preserved when translated as “becoming.” Terms such as “existence” or “being” do well to indicate the planes of rebirth, but miss the opportunity to steer a reader’s understanding of *bhava* toward the dynamic process it is, a way of looking at the world congruent with right view. The translation of “becoming,” one the other hand, does exactly that.

⁴ Peter Harvey in *The Selfless Mind: Personality, Consciousness and Nirvāṇa in Early Buddhism* (1995) describes becoming as “an aspect of the working of discernment” occurring both between lives and “between perceptual cycles” (134).

being's internal psychological worlds of becoming within that realm. Another way of stating this principle of becoming is that craving for types of food—physical, emotional, or mental—shape the world one is born into. But it is also the case that the types of food a particular world offers will determine what one ultimately eats and how craving will interact with the food offered by that world going forward.

The Unravelers takes becoming, as its central theme, since the novel aims to depict the awesome power each individual possesses to shape his or her world of experience, macro and micro form one moment to the next. This thesis explores how paying appropriate attention to the mind's tendency to shift location within these worlds produces greater freedom, and posits the Buddhist teaching that practicing the noble eightfold path eventually allows one to step outside of the process of becoming and into the deathless (awakening).

For the Buddhist meditator, the worlds of becoming are manipulated through concentration practice, which (within the context of the rest of the noble eightfold path) can bring the process of becoming to an end.⁵ The purpose of writing within the tradition of the early Buddhist texts, on the other hand, is to give the reader a taste of a literary world congruent with this path of practice—to introduce the reader to fabrication for the sake of reaching the unfabricated, to enter worlds for the sake of going beyond worlds, and to create the type of karma that leads one to the end of karma with the experience of awakening (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.237).

⁵ Sue Hamilton, in *Early Buddhism: A New Approach: The I of the Beholder* (2000), also notes these two levels of “worlds” in Theravāda, writing that they are indicative first of “cosmological levels: each level is itself a [populated] ‘world,’” and secondly as worlds pertaining to levels of meditation where, “the characteristics of the state of mind acquired at each meditative stage are said to be similar to the characteristics of a corresponding cosmological world.” She combines the terms Thānissaro Bhikkhu uses above, calling becoming a “psychological cosmology” where “one’s normal everyday conceptual framework corresponds to the normal everyday world we see around us” or, “a lofty heaven correspond[s] to an appropriately advanced meditation level” (94).

In other words, *The Unravelers* not only depicts the process of world creation through the factors of fabrication and becoming, but it also depicts the process of their unraveling through dispassion. According to the *suttas*, dispassion is what leads to the unfabricated, to going beyond worlds. In *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 8:53, the Buddha's step-mother and first bhikkhuni, Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, asks for instruction "in brief" so that she can remember it when practicing in seclusion. The Buddha directs her to develop qualities that "lead to dispassion, not to passion" first and then mentions seven other outcomes that she should aim toward. When any of these eight outcomes are achieved the Buddha says that she "may categorically hold, 'This is Dhamma, this is Vinaya, this is the Teacher's instruction'" (384-85). Dispassion is aimed at throughout the *suttas* including in the Buddha's famous Fire Sermon, *Samyutta Nikāya* 35.28, where the refrain is repeated in reference to each of the senses: "Disenchanted [with the ear, nose, tongue, body, and intellect], he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released" (267-68).

The teaching on dispassion is not just for practitioners on the verge of awakening, such as Mahāpajāpati Gotamī, or the monks listening to the Fire Sermon. Dispassion is also presented in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon as an appropriate summary of the Buddhist teachings to be given to those as an introduction to the dharma (such as in a Buddhist novel). In *Samyutta Nikāya* 22:2 a group of monks inform Sāriputta—one of the Buddha's two chief disciples and the one considered foremost in discernment (Thera, Hecket 1997, 17)—that they are heading to foreign lands. Sāriputta warns them that "the people there are wise & discriminating [and] will question a monk: 'What is your teacher's doctrine? What does he teach?'" He tells the monks that their answer should be, "Our teacher teaches the subduing of passion and desire." When the wise and discriminating people ask "subduing passion and desire for what?" Sāriputta answers in

terms of the aggregates: “Our teacher teaches the subduing of passion & desire for form . . . for feeling . . . for perception . . . for fabrications . . . for consciousness” (178).

If dispassion is not often the first Buddhist teaching we hear, it may be because we are the ones living in foreign lands—a place where the introduction of the dharma of the *suttas* from the *Pāli* Canon is still in its infancy. Furthermore, how many North Americans and Europeans, when learning of a practice aimed at dispassion would be “wise and discriminating” enough to inquire further and ask, “subduing passion and desire for what?” It would be more likely that we would simply go looking for a different teaching.

As will be discussed in sections II, VI, and VII, characters who practice for dispassion are, likewise, more or less non-existent in the genre of the Buddhist novel. *The Unravelers* not only offers this representation through narrators who purposefully develop dispassion, but also seeks to make dispassion aesthetically attractive. The challenge in doing so is that my novel requires the attention of readers who are weaving the three types of fabrication through *passion* as they read. In order for readers to willfully engage with a novel that should induce *sāmvēga*—a sense of dismay for where the aims of the world based on passion lead—they must empathize with the characters by identifying with their sufferings and then maintain enough curiosity in their path to continue reading. Section IV, “*Rasa*” explores the primary tools of historic Buddhist *kāvya* to accomplish precisely these aims. To enter and remain in a literary world, the reader needs to enter a world of becoming. They must enjoy the meal provided by the work, to savor it. The savor, *rasa*, not only provides the enjoyment to keep the reader engaged, but if done skillfully, can even help the reader digest Buddhist teaching, such as dispassion, that may have been otherwise unpalatable.

The Karma of Writing a Buddhist Novel

The Buddhist path is one rooted in intention, a term so central that it alone forms the historic Buddha's shortest definition of karma (action) in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 6.63 (305). The initial intention behind writing a Buddhist novel should be explored, because the results of inviting a reader into a literary world are real. Each reader who inhabits a world of literature will—at least to some extent—find his or her future actions influenced, and in accordance with the principle of karma, the writer is left with a share in the actions he or she intended to inspire.

Karma (or intention) provides the framework for the entirety of the Buddhist path. Our karma not only colors the way we experience our present world, but it also creates the potential for the next one—whether it be the next room we step into (a repeated image in *The Unravelers*), or the next body after death. Karma is created by how we treat others and ourselves, by the views we take on, and even by how we relate to our own thoughts. There is karma in the words we use to direct our actions, and also in the words we share with others, words that can harm or provide relief, words that can orient or present entire worlds of experience and possibility. So before writing a Buddhist novel—that is, if it is to be written within a genuine Buddhist context—the first question should be: What is the initial intention behind it? What are the hoped-for effects of the novel? What might be the resulting longer term karma of writing a Buddhist novel? What worlds of words are worth bringing into being?

The historic Buddha framed his instruction with a unique teaching about karma: that actions matter, that some actions give better results than others, and that not only will one have to meet the results of action in the future, but when one fully trains oneself in acts of present karma—fabricating new bodily, verbal, and mental acts based on the raw materials from the past with mastery—full release from suffering and stress and from the

system of causality is possible.

The Buddha trained his son, Rāhula, from the age of seven, in acts of present karma. In *Majjhima Nikāya* 61, in some of the simplest directives found in the *Pāli* Canon, the Buddha instructed Rāhula to train himself relentlessly in his actions: reflecting on the potential results of bodily actions, verbal actions, and mental actions *before* he did an action, on the short-term effects *while* he was doing an action, and by reflecting on the results of action *afterward*. If at any point Rāhula anticipated or detected harm to himself or others, he was instructed to abort that action and not to repeat it. If there was unexpected harm that arose after the action was complete, Rāhula was similarly instructed to avoid repeating the mistake in the future (312-16). Even the Buddha's most complex teachings, such as dependent co-arising, follow this very basic principle of training in the precision of present acts of karma. As we will discuss below, the fact that this basic foundational Buddhist concept of karma is so commonly resisted or misunderstood in North America and Europe is evidence of the existence of a non-Buddhist lens that plays a role in shaping the writing of "Buddhist" novels.

As an act of mental and verbal fabrication, writing a Buddhist *kāvya* is an act of world-building that carries with it all the karma inherent in such an act. It produces worlds that the writer will have to live in while creating the work, and worlds his or her reader will inhabit. Of course, this is true of any novel, but if the novel is to be consistent with the Buddhist path, these worlds must carry Buddhist intentions and serve an aim consistent with the Buddhist path of practice. In my case, the intentions behind the novel were three, although the last two can be considered further extrapolations of the first:

- 1) To consider carefully various habits of mind and the long-term effect of leaving them untrained. In other words, to both generate motivation for myself in the writing and to present that motivation through the narrative and characters. Of course, it

is up to readers as to whether they choose to apply the motivation to the actual training of their minds in skillful qualities. My intention is to at least present a contemporary literary version of Buddhist values and practices found in the *Pāli* Canon as an alternative choice to those values and practices with which the cultures of North America and Europe are more familiar.

2) To present karma on a larger scale, a multi-lifetime narrative through various levels of being, in order to imagine what living inside one's own acts of unskillful karma (acts motivated by greed, anger, and delusion) may be like. Additionally, there is the more subtle danger I wanted to depict: the complacency of living inside one's acts of skillful karma, the worlds that grow out of acts of generosity, virtue, and concentration practice. The novel also presents the dangers of being born in such pleasant destinations. The subtler danger here is that according to the historic Buddha, beings that achieve a heavenly rebirth are destined to be reborn once again after their good karma expires. My conviction in the unsustainability of creating and inhabiting any world permanently led to my final intention in writing *The Unravelers*.

3) The final intention was to imagine, along with a potential audience, the implications of a type of karma capable of ending karma entirely, otherwise known as the noble eightfold path. The path is taught as a grouping of actions that (if practiced just "right") provides improved happiness at every stage. Therefore, the effectiveness of the path lies in the practitioner's ability to honestly and accurately assess the limits of each level of happiness. Furthermore, the path—as a strategic attack on craving—is a type of karma that in the end undercuts even itself. In other words, the path is a series of actions woven in such a way as to allow an eventual point of unraveling of even skillful intentions at the end of the path (hence the title, *The Unravelers*). To drop intention entirely is the ultimate level of this skill, but to reach such a level, the mind's underlying

and subtle intentions must be first brought to the surface and comprehended. Ideally, any Buddhist novel should function in step with the Buddhist teachings themselves: world-building for the sake of eventually going beyond all worlds, an act of karma that generates motivation to go beyond even skillful intentions. Unfortunately, most Buddhist novels focus on ways to achieve only temporary happiness on a worldly level, and shun the transcendent aim of the historic Buddha's teachings or dilute them to the point that his message is changed.

My intentions in writing the novel were not an attempt to encapsulate the teachings of the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon as a whole, or even to detail how the entire path of practice is to be followed outside of the reading experience. Although it is possible to follow the more pedantic model of Aśvaghoṣa, it seemed unwise to attempt to depict the development of the mastery of the entirety of the noble eightfold path in a single novel. Therefore, I chose to focus on the depiction of the allure and drawbacks of the various types of happiness that North American and European societies (like all societies) typically aims at: our status, and the various sensual pleasures and relationships on which each individual fixates. Most central protagonists in *The Unravelers* take the unusual choice of stepping away from these "normal" fixations, which differentiates my characters from those found in most other Mahayana and Vajrayana-influenced Buddhist novels.

I tried to make the novel relevant to current times, while also culling themes from the early Buddhist *kāvya*s, recognizing that all societies of the past also contained people driven to extremes by greed, aversion, and delusion. So if *The Unravelers* is not a novel that details all aspects of the path systematically, my intention was to at least present characters who sometimes chose to develop distaste for their tastes, and dispassion for their passions, characters who confronted the drawbacks of the common worlds of

happiness and pleasure based on sensuality, who at least allowed room in their imaginations for the possibility of one day of reaching a transcendent awakening. The novel may provide an opening for readers to take their first step on the path, or the novel could expand a reader's notion of how Buddhists practice—for example, it may be the first time readers (even Buddhists) are exposed to contemporary characters who contemplate various forms of renunciation.

In the Buddhist novel as it currently stands, awakening is most often portrayed as an often-achieved, short-lived experience of “Oneness.” In the early Buddhist *kāvyas*, and the *Pāli* Canon in general, an experience of Oneness is classified as a concentration attainment in *Āṅguttara Nikāya* 10.29 which differs from awakening in that “there is still aberration, there is change” in Oneness (455-56). Oneness is *not* the transcendent goal of the Theravādin path. According to the historic Buddha, any identification with such an experience of Oneness—as different as it might be from our everyday individual self-identification—results in only a loftier self-identification, and yet another world of becoming. The process of becoming can be transcended only at awakening, and only once it has been fully developed in accordance with the path.

I present my characters considering the choices with which their particular culture presents them, from ordinary sensual pleasures to more expansive experiences of Oneness, and imagined what ways these characters would need to look at these worlds in order to find them wanting. My central characters, Vanessa, Kairos, and Leo model success at helping one another arrive at a place of dispassion where they are able to step onto the Buddhist path in the novel's final scenes. I found that the depiction of characters who achieve dispassion was largely absent from contemporary fiction, Buddhist or otherwise, but in abundance within the *Pāli* Canon and the beautiful expression of the early Buddhist *kāvyas*.

II. Literary Review

The major difference between *The Unravelers* and the Buddhist novels that precede it is that the vast majority of earlier works base themselves on the Mahayana Buddhist tradition or occasionally the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition which grew out of it. The notions of the Buddhist goal in these traditions (most often an awakening to some type of Oneness) and path to get there are often completely different from how Theravāda defines awakening and the practices that lead there. My novel therefore adds two new elements to the Buddhist novel, 1) *The Unravelers* explores the literary potential of the teachings in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon as found in the Theravāda tradition, and 2) the novel employs the theory of *rasa*, which was also used in crafting some of the *suttas* in the *Pāli* Canon, to present the path of developing dispassion as desirable (as detailed especially in section IV, “*Rasa*”). After the context of Buddhist fiction is established, only the first of the above new elements—*The Unravelers*’ exploration of the literary potential of the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon—is addressed in this chapter.

To establish the context of contemporary Buddhist fiction, two of its precursors will first be briefly examined in relation to *The Unravelers*—Jack Kerouac and J.D. Salinger, especially the singular Mahayana Buddhist novel that each produced, *The Dharma Bums* and *The Catcher in the Rye*, respectively. The chapter will then examine current criticism within Buddhist literature, especially the relevant first, third, and fifth volumes of the *SUNY Series in Buddhism and American Culture*. There, we find Buddhist novels are still overwhelmingly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism and sometimes the Vajrayana tradition which came out of it, and lack significant basis in the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. In the fifth volume, *Buddhism Beyond Borders: New Perspectives on Buddhism in the United States* (2015), Kimberly Beek details “Buddhist

fiction as an as an emerging genre,” in her article “Telling Tales Out of School” (128). The term “Buddhist fiction,” in Beek’s analysis of the genre, denotes novels and short stories almost exclusively American in origin. Following her lead, I use the term “Buddhist fiction” in a similar fashion throughout this essay and more specifically, “Buddhist novel,” to indicate the area of the same genre that concerns *The Unravelers* and the focus of this essay.

After a survey of this and other criticism, this chapter will then present *The Unraveler’s* distinct Theravāda Buddhist influences beginning with the early Buddhist *kāvyas* and their narrative modes that *The Unravelers* adapts. Karl Gjellerup’s novel *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (1906) is offered as the lone example of a Theravādin-inspired novel next, and then the chapter touches on the Theravādin tradition of the dhamma talk, where *suttas* are repackaged for a contemporary meditating audience—looking especially at one example from the inventive twentieth century Thai Forest teacher, Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo. Once this Theravādin basis for *The Unravelers* is established, this chapter will then close with a discussion of stylistic influences from several Buddhist and non-Buddhist novels, the study of which helped shape *The Unravelers* into its discrete form of experimental literary Buddhist fiction.

The Precursors of the Buddhist Novel: Jack Kerouac and J.D. Salinger

Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* and J.D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye*, the precursors to the Buddhist novel, were among the first to capture Buddhist experiences in post war America through fiction. Salinger was first and more covert, while Kerouac was significantly more influential. *The Dharma Bums* is therefore also discussed beyond this chapter and in greater detail in section VI. Kerouac and Salinger have served as examples for the generations of Buddhist-influenced writers that followed them. Their depiction of

the Mahayana Buddhist path of practice and the goal of awakening is still relevant to the Buddhist novel over sixty years after they were published. *The Unravelers* differentiates itself from these precursors, and the Buddhist novel which followed, through its *kāvya* basis and its presentation of Buddhist ideas and values specific to those found in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon.

J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* was perhaps the original precursor of the Buddhist novel. In David Shields and Shane Salerno's biography, *Salinger* (2013), Salerno writes that in the early 50's, J.D. Salinger was "years ahead of the Beats and early Zen adopters" (328). Another biographer, Kenneth Slawenski in *J.D. Salinger: A Life* (2010), notes that Salinger was studying Zen as early as 1946, five years before the publication of *Catcher* and twelve years before the publication of *The Dharma Bums*. Slawenski writes that Salinger embraced Zen because it "reinforced positions he already held . . . [which] created in Salinger a feeling of duty to offer spiritual enlightenment through his work" (Slawenski 153). The vehicle for Salinger's Zen was integrated into the narrator and main character of *Catcher*, Holden Caulfield. Salerno infers, "The voice *is* Salinger, direct and unfiltered by the artifice of third-person camouflage. It's his life, his thoughts, his feelings, his rage, his beautiful middle finger to the phonies of the world" (Shields, Salerno 244).

As he wrote *Catcher*, Salinger was studying the same type of Mahayana Buddhism as Jack Kerouac did when he wrote *The Dharma Bums*—D.T. Suzuki's essays on Zen. Slawenski writes that Salinger went as far as befriending D.T. Suzuki in 1950 (190). Especially influential in Suzuki's essays were his retelling of traditional *mondos* that Dennis McCort defines as in his essay, "Hyakujo's Geese, Amban's Doughnuts and Rilke's Carrousel: Sources East and West for Salinger's *Catcher*" (1997), as "a sudden

question [usually by the teacher] meant to evoke delusive view on some significant spiritual matter” (263).

McCort links a traditional Zen *mondo* to “an odd question [that] lingers” (260) in Holden’s mind throughout the novel: “I was thinking about the lagoon in Central Park . . . wondering where the ducks went when the lagoon got all icy and frozen over” (qtd. in McCort 260). McCort points to D.T. Suzuki’s *Essays in Zen Buddhism (First Series)* (1949) as the origin for Holden’s seemingly nonsensical and repeated reflections on the ducks. In essay 5, “On Satori—The Revelation of a New Truth in Zen Buddhism” Suzuki recounts a *mondo* where a student notes that some wild geese have flown away and master Baso twists his nose and says to him, “You say they have flown away, but all the same they have been there from the very beginning,” at which point the student achieves satori (qtd. in McCort 262-63). To McCort, the *mondo* about the geese concerns the “relationship between change and permanence,” a central theme in *Catcher* and a matter highly relevant to Holden’s struggle (263).

In the Zen tradition, a segment of a *mondo* is often assigned to a student as a *koan* to meditate on and keep in the back of his or her mind. McCort explains *koans* as “supra-logical spiritual projects meant to be worked on full time” (260) and concludes that “Hyakujo’s *mondo* becomes Holden’s koan” (263) based on four instances in *Catcher* where Holden contemplates the central park ducks (264-67). McCort sees this *koan* as “embod[ying] the core conflict of [Holden’s] life: . . . how can he discover that changeless, inviolate innocence that never flies away but ‘all the same has been here from the very beginning.’” (McCort 263). The *koan* of the ducks “lie[s] right at the heart of Holden’s identity crisis” (262).

McCort calls Zen in *Catcher* “a clear but strictly covert presence” (275), and the fact that the Zen *koan* in *Catcher* was only noted twice prior to McCort’s essay—a brief

mention in a Buddhist humor piece and as a reference in a college-level Buddhist textbook (Law 1996; Robinson, Johnson, 1995, 301)—only serves to back his assertion. Also obscuring Zen’s presence in *Catcher* is the fact that Salinger’s religious interests moved toward Catholicism (McCort 275) and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism (Shields, Salerno 324) as the 50s progressed. However, as McCort writes, “the presence of [Zen] in *Catcher* is all the stronger precisely for its being unannounced” (McCort 276) and all the stronger for readers who have noticed it. For as Salinger writes to Jean Miller in 1954, “the beauty of Zen is constantly absorbed in the fact that Zen is where you find it” (Shields, Salerno 324).

The use of Theravāda Buddhism in *The Unravelers* shares *Catcher*’s largely covert presence, and invites a similar investigatory reading. There are, of course, a few poems that originate in the *suttas*, but they are not the typical “Sayings of the Buddha” found in fortune cookies that Leo ridicules (57). The language is based on unusual metaphor and although it sometimes uses paradoxical language, there remain concrete ties to the Theravāda Buddhist teachings on craving and becoming. Through the poems, *The Unravelers* stresses the development of a way of seeing the dharma—a skill depicted through character development, and also through training the reader as discussed in section IV’s “The Karma of Reading.”

Whereas Salinger’s Zen is sometimes overlooked, Jack Kerouac’s *The Dharma Bums* is clearly related to Zen and has been labeled by Beek as a precursor to Buddhist fiction (128). Kerouac’s more overt Zen in *The Dharma Bums* has been paradigmatic for the American understanding of the Buddhist novel. Of all the post-war Buddhist novels, none have been more influential because it launched a “postwar Buddhist revival” in America according to Erik Mortenson in his essay, “Keeping Vision Alive: The Buddhist Stillpoint in the Work of Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg” (2009) (126). This revival

was largely a result of Zen's timely appeal to the beats as "[a]nticonformist, antimaterialist, antiinstitution" that they "sought to replace . . . with a spontaneous, Beat lifestyle" (127).

According to Ann Charters' *Kerouac: A Biography*, Kerouac was introduced to Buddhism in 1954 (qtd in Mortenson 126) through the essays of Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki as reported to him by Allen Ginsberg (125) (who also appears in *The Dharma Bums* as the character Alvah Goldbook). Suzuki was the most visible exponent of Buddhism in America during the period that Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums*. Together, Kerouac and Suzuki were the vehicle through which Buddhism was first encountered by many in North America and Europe, and helped establish the early perception of what Zen Buddhism teaches. Section VI details Kerouac's influential understanding of Zen, especially his distinct form of "Oneness" which he depicts in *The Dharma Bums*, and the "no rules" approach to the Buddhist teachings. The Buddhist characters portrayed in current Buddhist novels are by no means the same as Kerouac's Ray Smith; however, they still present a variety of experiences of Oneness—the widely portrayed and largely unchallenged Buddhist goal in Buddhist fiction. Likewise, versions of Kerouac's no rules Buddhism remains far more popular than the virtue of strictly adhering to the precepts that is more standard in Theravāda practice but nearly absent in Buddhist novels.

The Dharma Bums depicts Kerouac in the middle of his immersion in Zen teachings, especially through the 50s beat generation Zen scholar and poet, Gary Snyder as the character Japhy Ryder. Japhy is depicted in his small hut with his "crates all filled with beautiful scholarly books [such as] all the great sutras, comments on sutras, the complete works of D.T. Suzuki and a fine quadruple-volume edition of Japanese haikus" (18). As opposed to Salinger's more obscured Zen in *Catcher in the Rye*, Kerouac

explicitly presents the ecstatic Zen experiences of the Beats in *The Dharma Bums*, including Japhy's vision for Buddhism's future in America. "I see a vision of a great rucksack revolution thousands or even millions of young Americans wandering around with rucksacks, going up to the mountains to pray," Japhy says, calling them, "Zen Lunatics who go about writing poems that happen to appear in their heads for no reason and also by being kind and also by strange unexpected acts keep giving visions of eternal freedom to everybody and to all living creatures" (97-98). Soon after Kerouac's time together with Snyder, Snyder left to study Zen in depth in Japan for the next six years. Kerouac never saw Snyder again. Kerouac, meanwhile, moved back in with his mother and reverted back to Christianity, never to pursue Buddhist practice.

The Dharma Bums is a precursor to the Buddhist novel also in its eclecticism—the novel focuses on Zen, but mixes in ideas and practices from Tibetan Buddhism and especially Christianity (such as the quote below). Kerouac's formulation of the dharma in his version of Zen openly questions the traditional Buddhist principle of karma—at times, *The Dharma Bums* even questions whether human action really matters at all. Kerouac blurs such definitions purposefully. At one point, Ray says to Japhy, "I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make? We're all in Heaven now, ain't we?" (114). This escapism directly contradicts the Buddha's first noble truth and the duty attached to it as noted in *Samyutta Nikāya* 56.11: that there is stress and suffering in life, and the duty is to comprehend it, not to pretend suffering does not exist.

The Unravelers breaks entirely from Kerouac's Oneness, no rules, and the eclecticism he helped spawn, instead providing a representation of the Buddhist path congruent with the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon, the Theravāda teachings on how to develop dispassion that leads to release from suffering and stress. The path depicted in *The*

Unravelers also includes the supporting factors of renunciation and right view (that actions will have a future impact through the principles of karma). In Theravāda, the central understanding necessary in order to follow the Buddhist path is that the skill of one's own actions (karma) is crucial to develop, and *The Unravelers* aims to be as clear on this point as possible.

Recent Criticism on Buddhism and Literature

Kimberly Beek in, "Telling Tales Out of School"—an article that appears within the fifth volume of the *SUNY Series in Buddhism and American Culture*—presents "Buddhist fiction" "as a new form of creative literary discourse that recontextualizes Buddhism in the West" through the "contexts of Buddhist literature and Buddhism as it is developing in the United States through both Asian American and convert efforts" (125). Beek distinguishes "Asian American literature," where "Buddhism is often a component, but not an integral component, in the genre," (137) from "Buddhist fiction," which is authored mostly by American Buddhist converts and possesses as its "defining characteristic . . . a storyline that hinges on or is structured by a distinctly Buddhist experience" (128). This thesis is concerned exclusively with a sub-category of the Buddhist novel within the latter, what Beek calls "Buddhist fiction." *The Unravelers* is likely the first strictly Theravāda Buddhist fiction novel in a genre dominated by Mahayana and to a lesser extent, Vajrayana Buddhism.

Buddhist novels cut into many other categories of "genre fiction"—"romantic suspense . . . adventure and detective . . . political thriller" and sometimes literary fiction (126-27). Following Beek's classification system, *The Unravelers* provides an uncommon example of literary fiction within this "emerging genre" (128). Whereas the positive reviews of Beek's example Asian American novel (Amy Tan's *The Kitchen*

God's Wife, 1992) indicate, “the depth of the genre . . . and the breadth of the discourse created by the intersection of Western literature and Asian modes of storytelling” (137), Buddhist novels are not always as kindly received by critics. Beek suggests reviewers may not appreciate “Buddhist narrative modes” contained in Buddhist fiction because they are (as opposed to Asian American literature) “displaced outside of any Asian context” (138). As her example Buddhist novel, Beek offers Keith Kachtick’s *Hungry Ghost* (2003) and claims it is because of his “combination of Buddhist and Western modes of storytelling—displaced, inverted and therefore sometimes unpopular with reviewers—that [the novel] best exemplifies the labeling of this emerging genre” (138).

I will return to Kachtick’s unique use of the second person narration—the application of which Beek calls a “new Buddhist mode” of storytelling—near the conclusion of this chapter, and then I will also analyze Kachtick’s eclecticism in greater depth in section VI’s “The Buddhist Novel Then and Now: Jack Kerouac and Keith Kachtick.” There, I explain that Kachtick’s eclecticism in *Hungry Ghost* is representative of the Buddhist novel as a whole. This propensity of the genre is implied by Beek but not explicitly mentioned. Kachtick’s main characters cite far more non-Buddhist teachers than Buddhist ones along their “Buddhist” journey. So it is with some irony when in the author interview included within the paperback version of *Hungry Ghost* Kachtick laments, “I know of only a handful of contemporary Buddhist novelists—Peter Matthiessen, Kate Wheeler⁶, Jim Harrison, Alice Walker—and even among them you’d be hard pressed to find a book explicitly about Buddhism” (“Book Interview”).

⁶ In an interview with Terry Gross on NPR’s *Fresh Air*, Matthiessen discusses his novel *Far Tortuga* (1975) and how he brought his Zen training that emphasized “the immediacy and the spontaneity of this present moment” into his fiction. He calls *Far Tortuga* his “favorite of [his] books” because of the way he was successful at replacing metaphor and image with “these very simple descriptions of the thing itself,” which the reader could then use to “see the immense mystery and hugeness of existence shimmering behind those very, very concrete details.” Matthiessen is certainly a precursor to the developing genre of the Buddhist novel as a whole, but like the current Buddhist novel, his Mahayana Buddhist basis does not address the

In addition to the fifth volume mentioned previously, in which Beek's essay resides, the first and third volumes in the *SUNY Series in Buddhism and American Culture* edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff—titled respectively, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009) and *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century* (2011)—provide a representative cross-section of current Buddhist American literary scholarship, where redefinitions of even basic Buddhist concepts have dominated traditionalists who “bemoan the loss of authenticity as ancient texts, doctrines, and principles are adapted and transformed.” Whalen-Bridge claims that the purpose of the series is to serve as “The study of indigenization as Buddhism engages with America.” Whalen-Bridge explains indigenization, a term borrowed from anthropology, as “refer[ring] to transformations that occur within an imported cultural system, changes that enable it to better fit local customs” (*Writing as Enlightenment* 3). In fitting local customs, however, Buddhist practice and Buddhist literature in the North America and Europe has actually moved away from traditional ideas such as karma and rebirth and often redefine the four noble truths—a reality that American Buddhist literary scholarship in these volumes largely ignores.

In the introduction of the first volume, the editors ask, “What is a Buddhist Writer?” and consider if “we should look at the literature in a behavioral way” such as whether the writing produces greater mindfulness in the reader. The editors cite the work of Thānissaro Bhikkhu and openly wonder if some of their anthologized writing is in fact

Theravādin tradition in any detail. *The Unravelers* does not look to portray the wonders of the present moment and the Oneness of “existence shimmering,” nor “spontaneity” as emphasized in Matthiessen's literary Zen, but instead to depict escape from the horrors of a fabricated and conditioned world characterized by repeated birth and death through generating dispassion. In order to depict the Theravāda Buddhist path in *The Unravelers*, completely different modes of narration are called for than those modes congruent with the Zen employed by Matthiessen. A footnote on the above-mentioned novelist Kate Wheeler is included in section VI.

“Romantic Buddhism [sic: Buddhist Romanticism]”⁷—more actively selecting those Buddhist ideas “that license individual freedom” such as emptiness, while not embracing those harder to swallow, such as renunciation. These questions, worth their own volume, are not pursued and the reader is left only with an apologetic, “these questions will emerge with greater clarity as our understanding of [Buddhist] writers . . . becomes clearer” (*Emergence* 7).

Co-editor Gary Storhoff selects and analyzes Don DeLillo’s novel *Libra*. DeLillo’s work is not particularly relevant to my thesis, but what *is* of interest is that he does not identify himself as Buddhist, but relates to simply being a “spiritual person” who borrows ideas from many religions (9). DeLillo is said to be “leading his reader toward an understanding of self and its interrelationship with all things” (9) and therefore relevant to Buddhist writers even if we cannot classify him as one. DeLillo is certainly wide-ranging and interesting, but his very inclusion in such a collection is indicative of the way American literature sometimes strips the Buddhist ways of viewing the world of their own integrity. For example, understanding the “self and its interrelationship with all things,” is far from the traditional goal of all Buddhist religions. The *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon encourage Buddhist practitioners to look at the self not as a cosmic Oneness, but as a process of identification that causes stress (*Majjhima Nikāya* 44). The Theravāda path is followed by viewing phenomena through the frame of the four noble truths in order to achieve the goal of ending craving through dispassion, not of understanding interconnection as noted above.

The visions of the awakening experience offered by the series’ two most featured writers, Maxine Hong Kingston and Robert Johnson, both parallel a temporary feeling of Oneness, but are entirely divorced from the definition of the third noble truth (ending

⁷ See Thānissaro Bhikkhu *Buddhist Romanticism* (2015) and David L. McMahan’s *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (2008).

craving through dispassion). In an interview in the third volume, Kingston reports that she tries “to write [awakening] with images and what happens in the body when that moment comes. And probably the closest I came,” she says, “was in an image of a firefly. [At the moment she saw it glow], did we see a firefly, or was that enlightenment? It can’t be enlightenment, so it must be a firefly. But in that moment there was a light in which everything was included” (*Writing as Enlightenment* 155-56). Kingston’s experience here has parallels with Mahayana Buddhist tradition, but has nothing to do with Theravāda’s emphasis on ending craving through dispassion.

Robert Johnson, who the editors report has “arguably become the leading spokesperson for Buddhism and literature in America today” (*Emergence* 14) also presents awakening as a temporary glimpse of Oneness. Johnson says he has “read that the longest time anyone has stayed in the awakened state without interruption is two weeks,” and elaborates that, “You cannot maintain that state” (*Writing as Enlightenment* 150). Johnson’s claims are actually in opposition to the Buddha’s explanation of awakening, an experience he gives thirty-three names for in *Samyutta Nikāya* 43, including, “permanence,” and “undecaying” (368). Johnson, meanwhile, presents the Buddhist goal of awakening here as fleeting and unreliable like anything else. Johnson also offers a version of a traditional metaphor symbolizing the safety of the Dharma. In *Digha Nikāya* 16 the *Dhamma* is said to be like an island, as one’s only refuge (110), the implication being that there is no safety in *samsara* other than the Buddha’s teachings, and that the teachings are to be used as a refuge until awakening is achieved. Johnson explains the metaphor as, “You can be still on that little sliver of *samsara*, the island, before you merge with the One” (151). Johnson’s version of the island metaphor is not limited to the Buddhist path, but suggests anywhere in *samsara* as a potential jumping-off point to awakening. His definition of awakening is not consistent with that of the *Pāli*

Canon, and offers only a temporary experience of Oneness instead emphasized by Mahayana Buddhism. The result of consistently holding to the viewpoint that Oneness as the goal for all of Buddhism in current Buddhism and literary criticism excludes Theravāda while embracing eclecticism. Johnson reports that the work of Christian mystics is similar to his understanding of Buddhism. He explains the similarities, saying that when Christian Mystics, “push at the question of the relationship of this divine other and themselves, ultimately dualism collapses” (155).

Johnson is perhaps regarded as a leading voice because so many Buddhist writers present their own versions of this eclecticism. Keith Kachtick, in his introduction to *You Are Not Here and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* (2006), proclaims, “Fortunately, Buddhism—and the fairly malleable notion of Buddhist fiction—embraces the belief that there are many paths to the Kingdom” (2). He goes on to call Rumi, William Blake, and Emily Dickinson Buddhists; agnostics, Jews, yogis, and anyone at all that who witnesses impermanence or are “paying attention to *now*” are Buddhist (2-3). Kachtick encourages a very different practice from what the historic Buddha laid out in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon: attending to phenomena through the four noble truths (*Majjhima Nikāya* 2). Kachtick’s view is also a radical departure from the records of the Buddha’s teaching in *Digha Nikāya* 16: that the careful threading together of very specific types of action—that of the noble eightfold path—is the only way to awakening (141-42). The view of many Buddhist novelists is often that all views are worth embracing. But such an eclectic view is not necessarily a Buddhist one, and certainly not one backed by the *Pāli* Canon. The eclecticism in Kachtick’s novel, *Hungry Ghost*, will be examined in full in section VI.

We might add this tendency toward an eclectic understanding of Buddhism, one that is unique to each writer, to Beek’s description of the genre. Poet, and former abbot of

the San Francisco Zen center, Norman Fischer states in *Experience: Thinking, Writing, Language, and Religion* (2016), that he believes that writers are resistant to subscribe to a religion such as Buddhism because it limits the writer to “experience ‘according to the book’” or to “a Buddhist view of reality” and restricts the exploration of one’s art. He points out that each camp of art is no different, and “is a religion of its own . . . [and] every writer has his or her canon.” He writes, “There is an arts belief system, arts practices, dogmas, rituals (like the workshop, the reading); there’s clergy, saints, sinners, and so on.” Fischer believes writers can see it as “a violation of that tradition [of their camp of art] to hold to another tradition—like a religion” (265). From one point of view, writers of Buddhist novels might be seen to be in the process of breaking down this boundary between writing practice and the practice of Buddhism, since they do integrate some Buddhist ideas and narrative modes. However, Buddhist novelists as a whole still take the same limited approach: they tend to apply the dharma through the lens of their own individual “canon” of writers and thinkers rather than looking at their canon through the lens of the Buddhist one. From the Theravādin perspective especially, the latter is what the Buddha taught, and for an important reason—attending to phenomena through the lens of the four noble truths is how one can understand suffering and abandon craving.

In *Buddhism and American Culture*’s third volume foreword (*Writing as Enlightenment*), Jan Willis, a self-proclaimed “Baptist-Buddhist” professor, admits that “Americans have been receptive to a sort of literary, although not necessarily or primarily religious, transmission of Buddhism” and even more poignantly, points out that writing “cannot of itself enlighten us. Only our own actions can do that” (xii, xiii). If Buddhist-inspired writers are too quick to assimilate only the parts of Buddhism that fit into their own customs and beliefs, readers may miss the chance to explore action in the Buddhist

context, not to mention the full extent of where action can lead if one trains in accordance with the Buddha's path of practice. *The Unravelers*, therefore, gives more attention to the precision of the practice of renunciation and dispassion—two ideas as unpopular and misunderstood in North American and Europe today as they were in India at the time of the Buddha and every country Buddhism has traveled to. What makes these *Buddhist* beliefs and practices is not simply that they are different from our ideas and customs, but that (from the Theravādin point of view) they produce different results when put into practice—these are actions that readers of Buddhist novels should be able to test for themselves by putting them into practice, but cannot if they never hear or read about them.

Buddhism, therefore, cannot be said to not yet be fully applied by writers of Buddhist novels as a whole until all three schools are more fully represented. The “Buddhist” truths that have emerged through Buddhist novels are not often the four noble truths, but individual and eclectic notions of the Buddhist goal. These varied interpretations most often take their inspiration from Mahayana (especially Zen) and sometimes Vajrayana, and add other religions and thinkers that seem parallel to the writer's understanding of that goal. Beek writes that, “Buddhist fiction provide(s) a Buddhist orientation more so than an undisputed, definite origin” (139). But in order for readers to test or simply learn about the historic teachings of the Buddha as found in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon, more is called for. *The Unravelers* utilizes not only “traditional antecedents” (139), but also depicts a Buddhist world-view that is aligned with its religious textual origin. In other words, for readers looking to orient toward the *goal* of the Buddhist practice as described in *Pāli* Canon, a novel that depicts the path leading to dispassion, such as *The Unravelers*, adds the essential ingredient of the religion to the disparate collection of Buddhist novels.

The intention behind *The Unravelers* is to provide motivation for interested readers to follow the Buddhist path as laid out in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon and also education about lesser known aspects of the path and the distinctiveness of the *suttas*’ Buddhist goal. The novel is written within the teleological mode consistent with how Buddhist practice is described as a path leading a practitioner toward the goal of awakening in the *Samyutta Nikāya* 51:15 (435-36). *The Unravelers* similarly presents awakening as a goal that can ultimately be reached by following a path, similar to how a bridge to a city does not bring the city into being, and yet, one can get to the city by walking across it.

To these ends, *The Unravelers* continues and expands the practice, emblematic of Buddhist novels, of merging “Buddhist and Western modes of storytelling” within a more clearly defined context of *rasa* adapted from the early Buddhist *kāvya*s. With the inclusion of *The Unravelers*, the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon and the theory of *rasa* (detailed in later sections, especially IV’s “*Rasa*”) are for the first time integrated into the emerging genre of Buddhist novels.

Incorporating Narrative Modes from Theravāda Buddhist Literature

Two Examples of Buddhist Novels

Buddhist novels as a whole lack many examples that fully utilize the literary origin of a single source school. *The Unravelers*, however, applies the Buddhist narrative modes of the Theravādin early buddhist *kāvya*s. Identifying with one tradition is far from arbitrary. According to *Buddhist Religions* (2004) by Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thānissaro Bhikkhu, these different schools actually deserve to be distinguished from one another as different *religions* since they take different texts as their authority, state different goals for their practice, and have formed entirely separate institutions (xxi).

The more common approach for a contemporary novelist using Buddhist themes is not to identify with any Buddhist school at all, but to conduct literary experiments with the big ideas of the Buddhist traditions. This often means taking the teachings out of context or even applying them in ways that are contrary to the Buddhist path. An example is *Life After Life* (2013) by Kate Atkinson where a type of reincarnation that is inconsistent with many schools of Buddhism, especially Theravāda, is adopted. Rather than the typical “Buddhist convert” (like most authors of a Buddhist novel according to Beek), Atkinson is at most a “Buddhist sympathizer” (128). As someone born in England, she also represents another minority among Buddhist novelists—an author who is not American. The protagonist, Ursula, relives the same life, but it unfolds differently each time. Mostly, her life diverges from the previous version without Ursula making any new choice or intention at all. In an interview with NPR, “‘Life After Life,’ The Many Deaths And Do-Overs Of Ursula Todd” Atkinson muses about death in terms that are distant from any Buddhist religion’s understanding of karma and rebirth. She says, “I should retreat into a better form of Zen Buddhism than this kind of ego-dominated thing. But I don't know, I mean, I want to come back as a tree but I suspect that it's just not going to happen, is it?” before admitting, “I think [death] is possibly the end. Oh, we don't know, do we? We have absolutely no idea. It's an awfully big adventure, as J.M. Barrie would say.” And that’s what *Life After Life* offers, an adventure across lifetimes, but one in which Ursula makes very little meaningful change. Atkinson admits in the same interview that despite all Ursula’s opportunities for do-overs, it’s “Not that she improves herself.”

Ursula’s Buddhist experience-revolves around two scenes with a psychologist who is sympathetic to Buddhist thought and shares his insights with Ursula. The psychologist explains to Ursula that “Time is a construct,” which further separates the

novel from the Buddhist notion of karma as found in the suttas—the actions she performs in time and their long-term ramifications through time are rendered meaningless. This particular presentation of reincarnation ignores the individual intentions (karma) that drive rebirth onward. Like many writers interested in Buddhist thought, Atkinson depicts a version of karma that is at best vaguely reminiscent of one of the many branches of Mahayana—in this case the essentially static universe of the Hua Yen school—but has no basis in Theravāda.

In contrast, *The Unravelers* depicts rebirth in traditional Theravāda terms of shaping our next worlds through present action. Atkinson's portrayal of rebirth suggests the opposite: the pointlessness of action, and the disconnection between cause (action) and effect (rebirth). Furthermore, Atkinson's book is framed by one primary and fully intentional act that is planned by the main character in advance (at the conclusion of novel) where Ursula positions herself to assassinate Hitler and then does so. Through the elevation of an act of killing (a breaking of the Buddha's first precept), and the heroic connotation the act carries in *Life After Life*, Atkinson again contradicts the traditional Buddhist teachings. Although some schools of Mahayana and Vajrayana allow for the breaking of the precepts in certain situations, Theravāda holds that the karmic consequences always far out way any short-term advantage that such actions offer. Overall, Atkinson's novel uses an indistinct Buddhist presentation of karma and rebirth that sometimes champions following intentions that are the opposite of the Theravāda Buddhist path.

Ruth Ozeki provides an example of a contemporary Buddhist novelist who is far more firmly rooted in one Buddhist school—in this case Zen—than the typical Buddhist novelist. An ordained Zen priest, Ozeki explores the Zen notions of interdependence and no-self in her 2013 novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*. She reports on these concepts at

length in an interview with Eleanor Ty in the literary journal MELUS (161-63). Her novel draws largely on Dogen, a thirteenth-century Zen monk, and his masterwork *Shobogenzo*. Her characters contemplate Dogen's notion of time *via* quantum physics, Schrödinger's cat, and contemporary environmental concerns.

Ozeki keeps her novel consistent with her understanding of Dogen, which results in a level of integrity within the novel. Ozeki doesn't borrow haphazardly from a Buddhist tradition, but enters a genuine conversation with the texts of Zen, and even the way the religion is traditionally practiced in Japan. In the figure of Jiko, an elderly Zen nun, Ozeki represents the old Zen ways of practice. *The Unravelers* similarly stays connected to traditional texts from a single school (in this case the tradition of Theravāda as preserved in the *Pāli* Canon) and it also depicts Buddhist training as a "living tradition"—something necessarily related over time between a teacher and a student. In *The Unravelers*, the characters Kairos, Vanessa, and Leo all have contact with a visiting monk at a lay dharma center in New York City. The time spent practicing at the center plants a seed that finally sprouts at the end of the novel when all three characters decide to take birth in places more conducive to the practice of meditation.

Ozeki reflects on the Zen teachings of *Shobogenzo* in her novel largely through footnotes, offering more explicit connections with her Zen text than *The Unravelers* Theravādin one. *The Unravelers* does embed a few unidentified poems (*Sutta Nipāta* 4.2 and 4.15) from the *Pāli* Canon, but otherwise it is only through indirect means—such as advice by The Guild that is consistent with the teachings on becoming, fabrication, and dispassion—that the *Pāli* Canon is interpolated throughout the novel. One example is when The Guild inserts itself into the conversation of dining passengers on a train car, so that Vanessa will overhear their advice. Vanessa narrates this section.

“She [Vanessa] would reconfigure any number of horrible worlds simply to have something to stand on,” he says to his wife. “We challenge her to go beyond death, and she in turn dives into the detritus of those who have harmed her.”

The husband looks down at his palace fish curry and slurps some up as the wife looks over at me. “You are like a cat with a flock of dead birds buried sixteen days in the back yard,” she says and looks at her husband as he rests his spoon on the bowl. She looks back at me, accusingly, “Each day you bring us an offering unearthed.”

“Really,” the husband says, dabbing at his face with a napkin, and then looks at me too, “Must this. Continue.” He goes back to eating. (83)

The Buddhist ideas of *The Unravelers* are likewise introduced indirectly whenever possible in keeping with the principle of karma. As The Guild says repeatedly to Vanessa: while their suggestions are in her best interest, it is really up to her to decide when to pick up their words and apply them.

The Guild’s tone might surprise some who have not had lived with a Buddhist teacher who trained in Asia—although it is a tone that is common even in writings and transcriptions of both the Zen tradition (such as Dogen who was influential for Ozeki) and of the Ajaans from the Thai Forest tradition of Theravāda (who were influential for *The Unravelers*). If this stern voice does not register to readers at first as “Buddhist,” it is because lay retreat-centered dharma is overwhelmingly what practitioners have been exposed to in the United States and Europe. The Guild’s tone with Vanessa is indicative of her participation in training through an ongoing student-teacher relationship in the monastic Buddhist tradition. Their sometimes sharp intensity is specific to situations in which they aid Vanessa and is an indication of her advancement on the path, of her

ongoing choice to pursue Buddhist practice even through difficulty, and of her closer relationship with them, likely over many lifetimes. In order to depict the Theravāda teachings in *The Unravelers*, it was crucial to not only depict the living tradition through The Guild, but also to package traditional concepts like karma and rebirth in a mode that is consistent with Theravāda. Fortunately, the *Pāli* Canon and Aśvaghoṣa—in their early Buddhist *kāvya*s—provide traditional examples of books that use *rasa* and narrative modes which support it in order to convey the Buddhist path.

The Early Buddhist *Kāvya*s

The books of the *Udāna* and *Dhammapada* from the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon are *The Unravelers* earliest influences and likely the earliest Buddhist *kāvya* texts. The *Udāna* is a hybrid text of prose and poetry that artfully presents such challenging topics as going beyond becoming, and the *Dhammapada* is a poetry collection of some of the most famous teachings of the Buddha that instructs on the results of both wise and heedless action. Both works use the theory of *rasa*, integral to all Indian *kāvya* literature, which not only provides the enjoyment to keep the reader engaged, but if done skillfully, can provide a taste of the happiness that comes from the Buddhist practice of training one's mind. These two books from the *suttas* demonstrate how the astounding and the heroic *rasas*, respectively, are used to extol the virtues and transcendent ends of dispassion and release of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition—topics discussed in detail in section IV, “*Rasa*.” Here, I will briefly point to two other areas where these early books were influential to *The Unravelers*: in their Buddhist concepts in and of themselves, such as the *Dhammapada*'s ethics of cooperation; and in their mode of delivery, such as the *Udāna*'s hybrid narrative mode.

The Unravelers adapts the *Dhammapada*'s "ethical lesson of human cooperation"—the book's subplot of a person achieving worldly happiness by helping a *Dhamma* hero, such as a monk, on his path to awakening (Ṭhānissaro, *Dhammapada* ix, x). In *The Unravelers*, the narrators of Vanessa and Leo, especially, reach their ends as guide and monk precisely because they are willing to help each other despite past harm on both sides. The depiction of these ethics as present within the characters of *The Unravelers* are analyzed more fully in Section VI's "The Heroic and Astounding *Rasas* in the Early Buddhist *Kāvyas* and *The Unravelers*."

As poetry, the *Dhammapada* has limited application to the Buddhist narrative modes in *The Unraveler's* beyond the fact that both rely on *rasa* to convey the Buddhist path. *Udāna* (*Exclamations*), however, provides the earliest example of a narrative mode applied toward the structure of *The Unravelers*. The *Udāna* offers a hybrid collection of prose stories followed by a verse of what the Buddha exclaimed at that moment. These exclamations are usually a distillation of the story's lesson.

In some of the novel's most important moments, *The Unravelers* too includes a poem near the end of the chapter that provides a summary of the Buddhist themes of that chapter. These poems provide a microcosm of the chapter and operate like the becoming itself—where intensified moments of craving (or the abandoning of craving through dispassion) precipitate a character's change of worlds. Examples include the Lai Bai poem lusting for escape through travel in "Kairos: Year Zero," a poem that mirrors Kai's mind-state at death when he too craves travel. Another example is the Maori song in "Vanessa: First Light" that encapsulates Jules' addiction to ecstatic states of love. The becoming presented by the Lai Bai poem delivers Kai to his next birth, whereas the process of becoming captured by the Maori song is followed by Vanessa and Jules taking birth into a new type of life following their breakup.

In other instances of character change, poems from the *Pāli* Canon appear (*Sutta Nipāta* 4.2 and 4.15), as Vanessa or Kai shift to a Buddhist way of viewing the world seeing beings everywhere as fish in a drying puddle. These instances of character change in my novel are analyzed more fully in section IV's "The Karma of Reading." Additional heterogeneous forms in *The Unravelers* function in the same way—they capture a character's process of becoming in microcosm, such as the creation story read to Kai in "Kairos: Birth." In this final example, the brief creation story acts as the opening to the chapter, preceding (perhaps predicting as well) an actual birth for Kai in the tire tube scene. All the above examples from *The Unravelers* draw on the *Udāna*'s hybrid form—where the prose text tells a longer story and a shorter, heterogeneous form is embedded in order to deliver a succinct Buddhist lesson or way of seeing the world.

The *Udāna* and *Dhammapada* are the earliest in origin of the many narrative modes from the Theravādin tradition adapted by *The Unravelers*, but the two early Buddhist *kāvya*s written by first-century poet-monk Aśvaghoṣa (*Life of the Buddha* and *Handsome Nanda*) were perhaps the most influential Buddhist narratives in the writing of *The Unravelers*. Aśvaghoṣa relies on the *suttas* heavily, dramatizing them through more elaborate *kāvya* styling than either the *Dhammapada* or the *Udāna*. His *Handsome Nanda*, for example, expands upon the earlier canonical story of the Buddha's cousin, Nanda, found in the *Udāna*. Aśvaghoṣa is the best example of a writer who depicts compelling characters that make the Buddha's middle way clear and desirable, while remaining mostly consistent with the teachings of the *suttas*⁸. Aśvaghoṣa's two narratives are consequently examined more than any other writer in this thesis.

⁸ The question "Is there a self?" is a question that Buddha categorically puts aside in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon (*Majjhima Nikāya* 2; *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 44:10). According to *Buddhist Religions*, as Indian Buddhist literary culture arose, Aśvaghoṣa's *Buddhacarita* was "among the earliest extant Buddhist texts to state explicitly that there is no self" (Robinson, Johnson, Thānissaro 91).

Aśvaghoṣa's early Buddhist *kāvyas* provide a template for *The Unravelers* narrative arc. His focus is first on the development of an aspirant's right resolve: his main characters—the Buddha, as a young bodhisattva, and Nanda—learn to avoid the extremes of self-affliction and especially that of sensual desire, and then seek happiness through other more fruitful means, particularly the practice of concentration. Furthermore, Aśvaghoṣa's consistent use of specific traditional Buddhist metaphors—such as medical healing and gold refining—convey the Buddhist practice as a process, capturing nuances of character change that would otherwise be difficult to depict. Aśvaghoṣa's technique, especially in *Handsome Nanda*, was instrumental in the development of a similar narrative modes in *The Unravelers*, namely, the application of specific objects to each character in order to build narrative cohesion despite four interwoven narrators. The use of physical objects in *The Unravelers* similarly draws attention to moments of character change and their progress on the path, while keeping their struggles distinct. Most of sections IV and V of this essay are devoted to the particulars of Aśvaghoṣa's influence.

***Dhamma* Talks in the Thai Forest Tradition**

Aśvaghoṣa is an atypical example of an Indian Buddhist monk who wrote surviving Buddhist narrative, but the general tradition of integrating the Buddha's words when a monk teaches *dhamma* has been part of the unbroken lineage that goes back to the Buddha's first disciples. For hundreds of years the texts were chanted and cross-checked by skilled memorizers until they were finally written down in the first century B.C.E. The *Pāli* Canon, the lone early manuscript surviving in full in the early Buddhist schools, preserved a common account of the Buddha's teaching for the Theravādin tradition

See Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu's *Selves and Not-Self* (2011) for full discussion on this topic in relation to the *suttas*.

(Robinson, Johnson, Ṭhānissaro 46). The textual tradition of the *Pāli* Canon, however, also continued to be relayed orally, at least in part, through compositions like the *dhamma* talk. Past and present *dhamma* talks by Buddhist teachers continue to be commonplace in all Buddhist traditions, and can be found in recordings, transcriptions, translations, and edited versions of the talks in print. In my own Buddhist study during the last twenty years, I have been exposed to their variety: talks by lay-centered “Vipassana” teachers, and those ordained and lay teachers from all three Buddhist schools: Mahayana (especially Zen), and Vajrayana (Tibetan), and Theravāda (especially Thai Forest). Over the past twelve years, however, I have studied exclusively in Theravāda’s Thai Forest tradition, whose *dhamma* talks have been by far the greatest influence in the writing of *The Unravelers*.

Although I have not consciously attempted to mimic or relay any particular *dhamma* talk into the text of *The Unravelers*, many talks I have read by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo, Ajaan Maha Boowa, and Ajahn Chah, and the many thousands of *dhamma* talks I have listened to and read by Ajaan Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, have been influential in my understanding of the *dhamma*. The *dhamma* talks of the Thai forest tradition have served as constant examples of integrating language and ideas from the *suttas* into other compositions. As previously mentioned, the *suttas* are present in my novel in a more obscured manner since the novel is intended for a more general audience. The priority was to present a Buddhist way of seeing especially addressed in section IV’s “The Karma of Reading,” and leave it up to the readers to pursue where these ideas come from if they so desire.

During a *dhamma* talk, the Ajaans (teachers) speak to their meditating audience who apply the Ajaan’s *dhamma* directly to what is happening internally as they train their minds. These *dhamma* talks are a blend of terms, passages, and stories from the *Pāli*

Canon and the Ajaan's own insight into how the Buddha's teachings can be best formulated to fit the current audience and assist his students meditating before him. *Dhamma* talks in the Thai Forest tradition are a much higher level *dhamma* than what can be digested by a common reader through a Buddhist novel since the speaker of and listener to a *dhamma* talk are often already familiar with the *Pāli* Canon and most importantly, are in the process of applying the teachings in the way they were intended—for training the mind through meditation. However different the contexts and level of *dhamma* that separates reading a Buddhist novel such as *The Unravelers* and listening to or reading a Thai Forest *dhamma* talk, there still exists the similarity between the way both forms attempt to make the teachings of the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon relevant for their audience through inventive narrative means.

Below, I will analyze "Consciousnesses" by Ajaan Lee which serves as an example of two specific narrative modes shared by the Thai Forest *dhamma* talk and *The Unravelers* in addition to their shared general application of the *suttas*. These specific modes are employed in these two very different Buddhist contexts for a similar purpose: to elicit a Buddhist way of perceiving the world in their audience.

The first narrative mode falls within the greater pattern of the Buddha's awakening as told in both the *Pāli* Canon (*Majjhima Nikāya* 19) and in Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of Buddha* through what are known as the "three cognitions." After viewing his own past lives (the first-person personal narratives of the first cognition), the Buddha directs his awareness to the past lives of other beings (the cosmological second cognition), and then finally applies this insight to the mental processes occurring in his own mind in the present ("emptiness mode" of the third cognition) in order to find release from the process of becoming, putting an end to birth and death (Robinson, Johnson, Thānissaro 20-21). The first narrative mode shared between *The Unravelers* and the Ajaan Lee's

Thai Forest *dhamma* talk especially concerns cosmology—it depicts karma and rebirth of other beings (the second of the Buddha’s three cognitions). The second Buddhist narrative mode that will be discussed is the use of repetition in order to offer the reader the opportunity to contemplate the same teaching over time and from a variety of different angles for the purpose of developing dispassion.

“Consciousnesses” is one of only nine surviving transcripts from Ajaan Lee’s recorded talks. Four of these are available in English translation in *Inner Strength*, (2011) (75). The translator, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, notes the presence of extended metaphors—a device also discussed in section V in relation to how they help to structure Aśvaghōṣa’s narratives—whose “appeal lies in the wit and imagination with which Ajaan Lee explores his imagery” (76). In “Consciousnesses,” Ajaan Lee details a visionary application of the Buddha’s “not-self” strategy to the array of voices in the mind—visible and invisible—that infiltrate our own consciousness and can lead us astray in our practice. Ajaan Lee uses canonical terms from the *suttas*—such as explaining the karmic connection between us and other consciousness—and the cosmological Buddhist narrative mode. He depicts the visible consciousnesses (those with bodies that inhabit our own), such as worms, or other “*kamma* debt collectors” (126) who we knew in past lives—now returning to eat our skin, blood vessels, and intestines. Occasionally, he even switches into first person accounts of what the worms are thinking: “They eat, eat, eat,—eat everything,” Ajaan Lee says, “Whatever you’ve got, you bastard, I’m going to eat it all” (126). He describes the worms extensively—as riding boats down our blood vessels, getting into gang wars, and even possessing vacation spots throughout our body (127). He also describes those consciousnesses without bodies, such as spirits and hungry ghosts, with “old scores to settle” from past lives who want to knock us off the path (125).

Both sets of beings (with bodies and without) illustrate the principle of karma in action across lifetimes and realms. *The Unravelers* similarly depicts the permeability of the mind as it serves as a locus for beings with past karma connections from a variety of realms to infiltrate in subtle ways. The invisible consciousnesses, for example, are depicted through each character throughout the novel: Leo as a hungry ghost feasting on the thoughts and moods of his family and friends who cannot see him (50-60), the invisible hell warden who whispers in Leo's ear preceding Vanessa's rape in order to precipitate Leo's fall and to "settle" an old karmic score with both him and Vanessa (124), the scene in the meditation hall when Vanessa spreads goodwill and then hears voices coming back to her from elsewhere (129-30), and of course simply in the way many of the narrators are depicted constantly looking through screens and eavesdropping in on each other.

Ajaan Lee provides example after example of the ways the visible and invisible consciousnesses are, "seeping into our own consciousness and making us fall in line with them" (123). Once he establishes his audience's attention with these vibrant reflections, he pivots to an increasingly subtle level of the *Pāli* Canon's not-self teaching, describing how other consciousnesses are not only tied up with our intellect, but even with our five senses. He asks his audience to question the *way* they look, taste, smell, touch, and hear, and how they *react* to the sensory input. He asks, "Is it the consciousness of some little animal lurking in our ears?" and "are those reactions [to sensory input] really the result of our own consciousness, or . . . of beings with bodies inhabiting our body? Or . . . consciousnesses without bodies? We don't know" (129). After questioning whether our own consciousness is the one enjoying the sights, sounds, tastes, tactile sensations, and aromas at each sense door, Ajaan's talk culminates with the result of such contemplation: dispassion for the senses, dispassion for sensory contact, dispassion for sensory

consciousness. He mixes in the *Pāli* words of the Buddha from the *Pāli* Canon's "The Fire Sermon," (*Saṃyutta Nikāya* 35:28), words his audience has likely chanted countless times, but perhaps in this new context they hear it with new understanding: "Dispassion for consciousness," Ajaan Lee says in his summary, "Everything gets spit out" and there is release (134).

This Buddhist way of perceiving the world results not only from the Ajaan Lee's use of the *suttas* and narrative mode of depicting karma through cosmology, as mentioned above, but also through the use of repetition, the second narrative mode he offers that is also in line with the *suttas*. One of the defining characteristics of the *suttas* is their use of repetition—the process of memorizing them required such a structure in the first place.

Throughout "Consciousnesses," Ajaan builds toward dispassion deliberately through repetition. One example occurs after each imaginative depiction of the consciousness of various other beings where Ajaan Lee returns to the canonical refrain that "Consciousness is not-self," noting that although his audience has heard this teaching, still they don't understand the Buddha's words. Such repetition is a re-invitation for his audience to attend again to the Buddha's instructions on how to attend to sensory input as not-self during meditation. It's likely that through this repetition, some of the meditators present for the talk would be able to disidentify to some degree with sensory consciousness.

The Unravelers aim is significantly more mundane in the Buddhist sense than Ajaan Lee's in the above talk, but the novel allows the reader to taste the characters' Buddhist experience of generating dispassion for sensual aims through this same above narrative mode of repetition. The repetition of images, thoughts, and partial scenes in my novel are an opportunity for readers to make new meaning out of representations of

earlier text as the reader becomes better acquainted with the novel's Buddhist lens. In section VII, I explain more thoroughly how repetition serves the novel's elliptical style aiming at dispassion. Like "Consciousnesses," the use of repetition in *The Unravelers* is also connected to the narrative mode of the Buddha's second cognition: contemplating karma and rebirth through the cosmological mode (the "knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings") so that one might generate motivation to eventually go beyond birth and death through the "knowledge of ending of mental fermentations" that is gained through the third cognition (*Majjhima Nikāya* 19).

The most important aspect of karma is not that there might be invisible beings whispering in our ears to get back at us from our harmful behavior in a past life (as in the opening of Ajaan Lee's talk). Although this reflection is consistent with the first and second cognitions of the narrative of the Buddha's awakening described earlier—knowledge of one's own past lives and the past lives of other beings—it is never portrayed by the Buddha as a transcendent insight. The key in *Majjhima Nikāya* 19, Aśvaghoṣa's early Buddhist *kāvyas*, Ajaan Lee's "Consciousnesses," and in *The Unravelers* is that characters (or meditators) are always portrayed as responsible for how their worlds are constructed and especially in how they relate to the ongoing process of fabrication. This is where the opening is found to go beyond all worlds at awakening—the insight consistent with the historic Buddha's transcendent third cognition.

Since Buddhist characters, and meditators alike, don't always see any other choices of action until many recurrences of similar experiences, repetition is also a useful narrative mode that goes hand in hand with the narrative modes of the Buddha's three cognitions. Together these narrative modes rooted in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon work to help the listener or reader to generate dispassion for past and future births in all worlds, and eventually the ongoing process of fabricating them in their minds. I have likely read

and listened to “Consciousnesses” by Ajaan more than any other *dharmā* talk for two reasons. First, because of its sheer entertainment value. It captures its audience. Secondly, because Ajaan Lee offers an ingenious Buddhist education, inducing an enrapt audience to apply for themselves a Buddhist way of viewing the world—eyes closed in meditation or opened and reading. “Consciousnesses” presents the trademark of any skillful Buddhist *kāvya*, that of education through enjoyment.

The Pilgrim Kamanita

The closest contemporary model for *The Unravelers* is Karl Gjellerup’s early twentieth-century Danish novel, *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, the best—and perhaps only—example of blending the traditional teaching of the *Pāli* Canon with contemporary fiction in North America and Europe. It is not surprising that this novel has generated next to no literary criticism, as Buddhist writers to date have demonstrated little interest in the literary potential of adapting the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon into fiction⁹. This novel depicts a romantic love story in India at the time of the historic Buddha, whom both main characters meet. As the couple are exposed to the Buddhist teachings, their discernment grows. They reassess their (and their society’s) over-reliance on the happiness based on romantic love and under-reliance on the happiness born of developing the Buddhist path.

Although the early part of the novel focuses on the couple’s romantic love, *The Pilgrim Kamanita* eventually breaks from the traditional happy ending of a *kāvya* love

⁹ Zen teacher Anita Feng’s novel *Sid* (2015) largely ignores the *suttas* to instead present a Mahayana retelling of the Buddha’s life story. In an essay, “Re-imagining the Buddha’s Life for Modern Times,” for Northwest Dharma Association, she writes, “It didn’t matter . . . how much [*Sid*] strayed from some earlier original telling,” and mentions Hesse as her inspiration. She explains, “Surprisingly, not since Herman Hesse’s ‘Siddhartha’ has anyone created a radically new version of the story of Buddha’s life. This fact alone inspired me to write this book.” Retellings of the Buddha’s life story was a historically common practice, especially within the Tantras. These new stories served to bring the Buddha’s awakening into line with the later Vajrayana doctrines (Robinson, Johnson, Ṭhānissaro 135-36).

story, where the couple reunites after a separation, enjoying worldly happiness together for the rest of their days. The protagonist, Kamanita, dies before he can reunite with his beloved, Vasitthi. The couple do meet in subsequent lifetimes in the deva and brahma realms, but the focus in these realms is for them to learn how to cut the cycle of suffering in their own hearts without relying on the palliative of romantic love.

The Pilgrim Kamanita follows a central narrative mode of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, that of relinquishing romantic relationships (see the last three sections of section IV for a full discussion of this topic). *The Unravelers* also develops this Buddhist narrative mode, especially in the case of the protagonist Kai who dies at the start of the novel before he can reunite with his ex-fiancé, Isabel. Kai spends much of his time in the afterlife, in the hungry ghost and deva worlds, obsessing over her, but eventually remembers his Buddhist meditation practice with the help of his guide, Vanessa, with whom he practiced in his past life.

Like the Buddhas narratives of his own practice as depicted in the *Pāli* Canon and Aśvaghōṣa's narratives before Gjellerup, *The Pilgrim Kamanita* also provides a strong example of the Buddhist narrative mode of demonstrating the workings of karma through cosmology in order to ultimately apply such insights inwardly. As the *The Pilgrim Kamanita* moves into Kamanita and Vasitthi's lifetimes in higher realms, the couple reflects on their experiences in the company of the historical Buddha, as time rapidly moves forward.¹⁰ In the case of *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, and *The Unravelers*—narratives that take place in the context of the Buddha's awakening—the protagonists of Kamanita and Kai each receive guidance from those with greater knowledge of Buddhist practice. It

¹⁰ *The Unravelers* similarly depicts the rapid passage of time in the deva realms relative to human life, such as when Vanessa's guide explains the functioning of her black room (30) and again when Vanessa (as a guide herself) offers Leo a short but fruitful human birth. Vanessa says, "I will wait for you, Leo, again at the divide, where your two years on earth will pass in a half-hour conversation for me" (269). The variance in how time is experienced between the human and deva realms is depicted in *Digha Nikāya* 23 (Tṭhānissaro, *The Buddha Smiles* 65-66).

is Vasitthi, in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, who demonstrates the way into awakening (390) leaving Kamanita behind in a very high realm as a brahma (a god). Kamanita reflects that he now has the karma that would allow him to become the great Brahma capable of calling the next universe into being. Instead of choosing such a powerful rebirth, Kamanita brings his mind to dwell on the “way to the eternal” (397), beyond birth and death—in the way Vasitthi did. Kamanita rejects the long (but still impermanent) life of the great Brahma, and resolves to go “out of the universe”—to become awakened—as a service to others. Kamanita reflects that his awakening, if achieved at this very start of the next universe, will be witnessed by countless beings. He surmises that his awakening will be “conducive to their salvation”—it will serve as inspiration in the future lives of those who watch, including those who will eventually become Buddhas themselves. He summarizes his motivation to achieve awakening, saying, “So that I shall help all in helping myself. For no one can, in truth, help himself without helping all” (398).

In the later Colorado part of the narrative of *The Unravelers*, Vanessa, like Vasitthi, provides guidance for Kai to get out of his worlds. In her chapter “Orientation for Kai,” Vanessa explains the problem with taking birth on *any* plane of existence, saying, “we are forever piecing the building together around us, as the floor haphazardly falls apart. Here is your reorientation: You make every hell and heaven you will ever know (194). Vanessa questions Kai at the end of the novel about whether he still wants to find his ex-fiancé, Isabel, and enjoy a lifetime with her. Kai rejects this offer in a chapter he narrates: “‘No,’ I say. She is not waiting for an explanation, but my mouth is already saying it: ‘I can’t breathe under water. No one can. I can only hold my breath for so long.’ My shoulders rise and fall in the thin air. ‘I’m not going to fight as the world suffocates. I want to get out’” (277).

Once he rejects this path, Vanessa then offers him another option, saying, “There are those in the forest who don’t fight for their food. You know some of them. Maybe you’d like to practice with the forest monks again. I’m going to” (273). Kai accepts and the final images presented in the novel are of the characters finding the path. Kai narrates its appearance and then Vanessa closes the dialogue.

Through the doorway of rock there lies a ribbon, undulating like water, as if it were lying there all along. It forms a path through the sky. Clouds now move back around it, billowing up from underneath until there is just the glimmering path coursing out through a sea of clouds. Copulas appear in the distance. There is a beautiful and distant city at the end of the path. Sunlight passes right through it, as if it is made out of air. My shoulders fall as I exhale.

“Your time is up, Kairos,” she says. “You’re going to have to go somewhere.”

“I thought I was getting out,” I say.

“You’re getting closer,” she says. “Just watch your next step.

There are some roads worth staying on. This one takes time. So take it.

Take the time.” (283)

As a counter-example, the protagonist Jules makes different choices at the end of the novel and she chooses to dive back into a birth based on her own impulsive habits (285-86). This open-ended approach is in keeping with the Buddhist sense that there are countless paths each person can choose instead of the path to awakening, as well as intimating that not all wish to work toward ending rebirth.

The Unravelers also depicts cosmic scenes, such as the opening of a universe—

much like *The Pilgrim Kamanita* does in its conclusion—in keeping with the cosmological narrative within the Buddha’s own three cognitions mentioned earlier. Rather than highlighting a choice between awakening or taking birth as a brahma, as in *Kamanita*, *The Unravelers*’ uses a cosmic scene in its prologue to bring attention to the relationship between birth and its causes—ordinary choices based on craving. *The Unravelers*’ presentation of the ongoing and ordinary, yet cosmic, implications of action, culminates with the characters’ choice of their next human birth.

In the prologue, *The Unravelers* describes the brahmas, what it calls the “radiant gods,” in a similar cosmic scene to the before-mentioned one in *Digha Nikāya* 27. The focus of *The Unravelers*’ prologue is not on awakening, as in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, but on the group of gods that fall into lower births to places like earth, and also on the Buddhist group of gods that do *not* fall due to their ability to feed on formless states alone: The Guild.

The Guild are long-time practitioners of the Buddhist path who demonstrate consistent humor when looking down at the foibles of those in the lower realms. Similar to how Vanessa aids Kairos, The Guild guides Vanessa. One guild member assists Vanessa as she makes her way from New York across the waters to the Great Divide where she will finally take rebirth. As Vanessa and her guide from The Guild wait in their chairs for Vanessa’s name to be collected, the dialogue between them unfolds as follows:

“It took you long enough,” he says.

“I also noticed that you aren’t actually my father. You’re just wearing his clothes. I’ve been too preoccupied.”

“Yes,” he agrees. “But you’re here. That’s what’s important.”

“My father was more handsome,” I say, stealing a look at him.

“Yes, Dear,” he agrees. “I’m just the ugly projections of those looking at me.”

I open my mouth to speak, but can’t find the words.

“You’re not that bad looking” I stumble. My eyes fix back on the open sea behind the boat. I crack into a half-smile.

“Sure,” he says. “Ok.”

“It’s just that my father was uncommonly good-looking.”

“Of course,” he says. “If we called him ugly, what would we be implying about your looks?” (178-79)

The Guild is almost always both helpful and playfully annoyed by human ineptitude. As detailed later in this essay—especially in section IV “*Rasa*”—The Guild inserts instruction consistent with the *Pāli* Canon into Vanessa’s map or into the language of those speaking around her. The Guild’s repackaging and sometime humorous use of the *Pāli* Canon also has Gjellerup’s work as its corollary. In *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Gjellerup explains in an endnote how he not only adapted the pre-Buddhist Vedas and Upanishads into his novel, but also imagined the so-called “Kali Sutras,” what he called a “jocular fiction” and claimed they were “within the bounds of the possible—nay, of the probable” (541-42). These “Kali Sutras” are especially effective at bringing one of the most notorious figures of the *Pāli* Canon, Angulimāla—a robber and murderer who becomes a monk—to life. By presenting non-returners through invented text (such as The Guild’s presentation of the deva guide and map), *The Unravelers* aims to present these beings, who exist in an unfathomably high realm in a relatable way.

The Unravelers does not depict specific canonical figures. However, the character of Leo—a drug addict and rapist who eventually takes birth to become a monk—does recall Angulimāla. The story of Leo follows the Buddhist cosmological narrative mode

mentioned earlier where beings are born in line with their karma. Leo and Angulimāla each demonstrate that no matter how corrupted one's actions or view of the world, there are always openings—sooner or later—of which one can take advantage to reform oneself. In the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon and *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, Angulimāla demonstrates that the changes can be rapid enough to even achieve awakening in the same lifetime. As *The Unravelers* takes a more gradual, graduated approach, Leo does not make it all the way to awakening in the novel, but by the end he possesses a more advanced understanding of karma and skillful action.

As the denizens drag him from the train and into hell, he explains to Jules: “I used to remember, every motion, every slight . . . Then I had my time to stick them back with prods. They'd get theirs too. But I'm done. They can kill me for a hundred years, but when they let me go, I'm not coming back to them next time” (109).

When he emerges from hell, Leo is again interrogated by a denizen about his past transgressions. Leo responds,

They asked *me* to tell *them* why I was there. Yes. They dressed a lot like you. A whole lotta help confession is. I get it. I *shouldn't've* a million things. But what does the pain accomplish after the fact? I'm angry at myself, when it comes down to it. But I'm going a different way this time.
(198)

Leo further demonstrates his understanding of karma as it relates to his own actions when he explains how his hells were all designed by his own hand. He says, “I had my ways. My intricate ways of getting it all just right. And I admit that it was all so intricately wrong” (199).

In order to provide space and time for Leo's development, he is the only character depicted across two human lifetimes. Leo's second life is short and painful, but one he

takes as the opportunity to learn how to feed in a way that is more harmless, without taking. He accepts his pain as past karma and does not create new karma by acting on unskillful craving, even though it means accepting his own death. Vanessa narrates this short birth by first describing the possibility of it to Leo, saying,

Like the birds, you plunge, as you visit any number of past lives, where you feasted on the weak, on any advantage, on every scrap of food you felt you needed, choking down every slime-ridden scale that you could catch in your beak—the money, the drugs, the woman who said yes, and the ones who said no. But that’s not you now. Your mind is not fused to hunger. It is watching. It is waiting for an opening. Your mind is stronger than your past misdeeds and you refuse to fall—you vow there will not be a return to their ways, to the familiar gravity of past folly. (265)

Leo’s second, short birth takes an immense amount of willpower, which demonstrates a strength in his character that he uses to overcome his flaws. His exertion of right effort (subduing unskillful qualities and developing skillful ones in their place) during his short birth is what provides him with an opening to become a monk in the next lifetime—a birth he is depicted as stepping into at the very end of the novel.

The Pilgrim Kamanita is the last example of a Buddhist novel that follows the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon. Current fiction novels (with Buddhist influence and without) were thus turned to in order to more fully develop the traditional Buddhist narrative modes, such as the cosmological mode of depicting karma across lifetimes, and to also develop a more a contemporary and experimental style that best presents *The Unravelers* dynamic theme of becoming.

Adopting Experimental Narrative Modes through Structure and Voice

The Unravelers is written as a teleological Buddhist novel—with the path and goal of the practice as described by the *Pāli* Canon always in mind. Since the novel takes complex ideas from the *suttas* as its basis—such as becoming and karma—and then bases its complex narrative structure and voice on those ideas, it can be classed as experimental literary fiction. Although, to my knowledge, no novel has attempted the same combination of experimental techniques, and certainly not for the same Buddhist purpose, many contemporary novels have applied *some* of the techniques. Some of the relevant influences are discussed below. In *The Unravelers*, these techniques are refined into experimental narrative modes that are congruent with the teleological structure of the novel.

Dictee

Before detailing the contemporary literary origins of what became experimental narrative modes in *The Unravelers*, I would like to first make an important distinction between my Buddhist novel based on becoming and the deconstruction of worlds in another experimental work, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* (1982). *Dictee* blends Daoism, auto-biography, and to a lesser extent Buddhism, within a highly discontinuous narrative which uses heterogeneous forms and source materials. Daoist and Buddhist texts, medical charts, and photographs are physically stitched into Cha's narrative, floating, without discussion of their relevance or origin. The text calls for an active reader who must piece together its various disparate fragments to arrive at an overall meaning.

Cha applies challenging Asian systems of thought to her narrative, but her organization and language is far removed from that of *The Unravelers*. Jonathan Stalling argues in *Poetics of Emptiness: Transformation of Asian Thought in American Poetry* (2010) that Cha's work integrates the Daoist principle of "self-emptying" (159, 175) into

the very loose structure of the work, one that does not concern itself with the process of constructing a self—as in *The Unravelers*—but instead “offers fragmentation as a method of opening alternative modes of knowing” (160). *The Unravelers* does not take this particular approach—found in Daoism and other schools of Buddhism—where emphasis is placed on an attempt to immediately deconstruct all worlds. Instead, my novel is interested in world-creation as a process and the Theravāda Buddhist path as one constructed through deliberate and increasingly refined action. *The Unravelers* depicts more defined and fully-formed characters and narratives than *Dictee* and uses a complex layering of narrative that mirrors the fluid and ongoing process of becoming—i.e. the taking on of an identity based on desire—rather than fragmentation. *The Unravelers* presents action as teleological, and—when constructed according to the principles of the Buddhist path—as an increasingly conscious effort to master the creation of worlds so that they might eventually be stepped out of entirely. Notions of character and identity in *The Unravelers* are presented as aspects of the path, constructs that are used like tools until awakening is achieved and the tools can be put aside.

Cloud Atlas, The Light People, Hungry Ghost, and The Wives of Los Alamos

The use of first-person in the *Pāli* Canon accounts of awakening (the three cognitions) seems to have been selected purposefully in the *suttas*, since in other Indian literature it was a seldom-used mode of narration. *Buddhist Religions* claims the “genre can easily be traced to the Buddhist understanding of karma—great insights come from what people *do*” (21). The first experimental narrative mode in *The Unravelers* discussed in this subsection is based on this early example central to the-Theravādin tradition. Several examples within contemporary literature provide models for expanding the more traditional first-person single point of view, into narrative with multiple first-person

points of view—although their ultimate narrative application and purposes are far different from *The Unravelers* Theravāda Buddhist ones.

The Unravelers opts for an innovative weave of four first-person narratives in order to both depict karma and fabrication as an intricate and awe-inspiring net of entrapment and to point to the way out through a specific understanding of karma consistent with the *suttas*. To better place *The Unravelers* depiction of karma through voice and structure, David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) provides one related example. The effect of his multiple first-person narrative and the resulting narrative structure in *Cloud Atlas* also produces an understanding of karma, although one that does not include the Theravādin goal of awakening. Gordon Henry's *The Light People* (1994), Keith Kachtick's Buddhist novel *Hungry Ghost*, and TaraShea Nesbit's *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014) will follow the comparison with *Cloud Atlas*. These last three novels serve as examples of further experiments in narrative structure and voice that *The Unravelers* further develops in order to intricately depict the process of becoming.

One version of the multiple first-person narrative technique has been employed recently in David Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* (2014) and especially the previously mentioned, *Cloud Atlas*. *The Bone Clocks* features five first-person narrators and six sections, the story told in chronological order between the years 1984 and 2043. Similarly, *The Unravelers* follows chronological order (although less strictly), presenting human-life flashbacks of the four main narrators that range between early-mid 1980's New York and 2029 in Utah and Colorado. Like Mitchell, *The Unravelers* presents the lives of the main narrators mostly through first-person.

Mitchell's *The Bone Clocks* and *Cloud Atlas* feature stories that are loosely connected, but demonstrate broad connections between beings in a variety of locations and times. In *Cloud Atlas*, for example, six first-person narratives take place around the

world from 1850 to the post-apocalyptic distant future. *Cloud Atlas* is Mitchell's novel most relevant to *The Unravelers* because *Cloud Atlas* features the rebirth of characters from earlier narratives into later ones. A significant structural difference between my work and Mitchell's is that *The Unravelers* presents a vastly greater number of chapters than any of Mitchell's novels, and those chapters tend to be shorter. The structure of *The Unravelers* allows the work to remain focused on the process of becoming. The short narratives are often "entered" or at times just "tasted" by each character from the post-human life deva (or heavenly) worlds or sometimes even through a hell realm—especially in the case of Jules, who enters worlds post-suicide through a line of lobster traps at the bottom of the Long Island Sound. While Mitchell's narratives depict more earthly locations and cultures, the narrators within *The Unravelers* are reborn into a greater variety of realms: Jules and Leo take birth in hell realms, Leo and Kai are also reborn as hungry ghosts, and Kai and Vanessa experience a variety of deva realms.

The rebirth of characters between stories is not as explicit in *Cloud Atlas*, but the "cloud-shaped birthmark," attributed to a character in the majority of the six nested stories, is the strongest clue that it occurs. Reincarnation is also featured prominently as a topic of conversation between characters in *Cloud Atlas*. Since *The Unravelers* is generally focused on just one—the most recent—human birth, the names of the characters do not change, and are easier to track. A focus on the last human birth also allows the narrator to be listed in each chapter heading in order to facilitate ease of reading.

The Unravelers follows the narrators between worlds more openly, allowing a more internal focus on the causal factors of their mental processes (including intentions) as the characters engage in the process of becoming (entering various worlds). Through this depiction of the process of becoming, *The Unravelers* demonstrates the Buddhist

belief that the results of action are directly related to the quality of the intention motivating the action. Training intention to be more skillful is the prime focus of meditation practice—an insight the narrators slowly move toward as the novel progresses. However, untrained intentions are constantly undoing the protagonists' efforts to train their minds. One example is Jules, who as a Catholic believes that she is eternally damned for committing suicide. It is her attachment to her views, and her refusal to actually observe the *effect* of holding such views, that keeps her from getting out of her hells. From the bottom of the Sound she narrates this process. She looks into one of the lobster traps and sees a world, saying:

I look into an empty train car. I back out and read the destination map on the side of the train: "The Molten Pit of Hell" leading to "The Hell of Thorns," and after that, "The Hell of Fire." There are a lot of places after that, but I'm tired of reading . . . The glass train doors slide open. This is exactly where I expected to end up for what I did. I enter. (100-01)

Jules has the power to shape her worlds, but chooses to destroy the worlds that would keep her buoyed. Jules does not consciously shape her action in positive directions or take advantage of good past karma, as when Vanessa tries to stop her impulsive behavior. Even when Vanessa points out that searching the bottom of the Sound is fruitless, Jules does not listen (137).

The main theme of *The Unravelers* is the development of insight into the process of becoming and training intention. *Cloud Atlas*, on the other hand, focuses on societal change. Although training intention and inspiring societal change are not mutually exclusive, the differing emphasis in the two works is a crucial distinction. *Cloud Atlas* does provide an example of how setting a strong and long-term intention can shape a character's narrative path through future lifetimes. The strong intention of the book's first

narrator, Adam Ewing, is depicted continuing through his presumed reincarnations (based on a matching birthmark) both as the fabricant abolitionist Somni-451 in future Korea and as Meronym, who rescues the main character from death or slavery in post-apocalyptic Hawaii. These reincarnations of Ewing work for abolitionist causes within various societies, although exactly how Ewing's path was set in motion is not clear until his original intention, set the 1850s, is revealed in the final pages of the book. When his lines are finally delivered, the work of Ewing's reincarnations across time make sense. The original driving force was Ewing's intention. He writes:

A life spent shaping a world I *want* [my son] Jackson to inherit, not one I *fear* Jackson shall inherit, this strikes me as a life worth living. Upon my return to San Francisco, I shall pledge myself to the Abolitionist cause, because I owe my life to a self-freed slave & because I must begin somewhere. (508)

Through his multiple lifetime narrative, Mitchell is able to highlight the power of an individual to shape his or her future—and in fact the future of humanity—through this strong intention, although it takes several lifetimes for it to bear full fruit. Ewing wants to make the world a better place for his son, but in the end, it is also his reincarnations that get to enjoy this new world. *The Unravelers* takes this principle to the next level: the characters set intentions to look for a way out of all worlds. No matter how good a world one can build, it still crumbles, and people will still suffer from old age, sickness and death. *The Unravelers* takes a decidedly Theravāda Buddhist approach to setting intention, and depicts its use to go even beyond death, and beyond space and time.

Mitchell's narratives as a whole do not always follow the Buddhist understanding of cause and effect (karma) on even a superficial level. For example, his characters frequently kill one another without the depiction of any obvious negative results in

present or future lives. However, his model is useful for the depiction of rebirth in the illustration of how strong intentions can bear fruit several lifetimes down the line. The drive of a central intention in *Cloud Atlas*, when coupled with Mitchell's narrative structure, produces the unexpected insight at the end of his work that strong and well-considered intentions of an individual can have long-ranging effects over many lifetimes on both the personal and societal levels. The results of intention in *The Unravelers* culminates with the depiction of the characters' final rebirth into their next human lifetimes at the end of the novel. *The Unravelers* does not explore what future impact the characters will have on society because in the *Pāli* Canon, societal change is presented as secondary, as something that comes out of the ability of individuals to fully train their minds.

The Unravelers' focus on how trained intention leads to increasingly refined birth is also depicted structurally. In a simplified representation of birth, characters are shown moving from one room into the next. The novel also features corresponding changes in chapter titles in order to draw the reader's attention to specific moments when birth occurs. This is the reason for changes in chapter titles even in instances when the same character continues to narrate.

Mitchell himself describes the structure of *Cloud Atlas* as "a polyphonic 'Russian Doll' novel" (Mitchell, "Guardian Book Club"). He explains that this idea for the novel's structure appealed to him: "ever since Italo Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveller* had wowed me at uni in the late 80s." Mitchell clarifies the difference between his and Calvino's approach, writing, "Calvino's book is made of interrupted narratives which are never returned to—my idea was to write a novel whose narratives would be returned to, and completed in reverse order." In the nested narratives of *Cloud Atlas*, each narrator

leaves behind the karma of a journal, a piece of music, a movie, or recorded testimony, that is then discovered by his or her future self.

Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, in her book, *Narrative Fiction* (2002) talks about the similar concept of “Mise en Abime,” which she describes as “something like Matisse’s famous painting of a room in which a miniature version of the same painting hangs on one of the walls” (94). In *The Unravelers*, the use of rooms (or traps or train cars) provides a visual depiction of this principle. Unlike *Cloud Atlas*, several layers or lives are accessible to the character (and the reader) simultaneously. The objects of past karma within each character’s room keep the past narratives present, and keep the rooms of the characters connected through the karma they symbolize. In keeping with the tangle of strings image that lead characters into further becoming, the narratives of *The Unravelers* are necessarily not as neatly nested as *Cloud Atlas*. *Cloud Atlas*’s Russian Doll structure moves forward and then backward, neatly building the future within the past and then unpacking the past from the future. This provides a narrative focus on the karmic connections between past and future lives and on the repetition of Mitchell’s themes despite the change in narrative style from one chapter to the next. *The Unravelers*, instead, focuses more on intention in the present—how present intentions can be trained to birth future worlds, and how past karma can be resolved in the present to facilitate additional options for birth. Past karma is certainly part of becoming, but it is not the most important element in *The Unravelers*. The use of objects in *The Unravelers* not only draws connections between earlier lifetimes, as in *Cloud Atlas*, but more importantly models the development of skill in the characters’ present intentions. The characters’ evolving skill is visible in the new and sometimes liberating ways they relate and interact with the objects in their possession and the old karma which the objects symbolize.

The narratives of *The Unravelers*, therefore, are nested within one another, but with greater complexity—each character has access to other “rooms” inhabited in the present by those he or she has past karma with. Vanessa looks in on the other characters through the string or screens of her “black room” within the deva world she inhabits. Jules looks in on people through lobster traps of hell, and Kai through screens and simply by sensing the mental presence of Vanessa through the change in coolness he detects around his skin.

Vanessa’s map, which provides a clickable key with poems from the *Pāli* Canon (clues left for her from The Guild), facilitates the development of dispassion between characters. For example, just before meeting Vanessa at the Great Divide to be reborn, Kai does not see Vanessa but questions her in his room: “I open a window. I ask *You*: With aging and illness and death approaching, what should we do with our time?” His question prompts a vision of Vanessa coming toward him on a ferry. Kai is able to read the map over her shoulder:

Overcome by this arrow
you run in all directions.

But simply on pulling it out
you don't run,
you don't sink. (263; *Sutta Nipāta* 4.15)

This is a traditional metaphor for transcending birth and death through the skill of not moving forward and yet not sinking, and was extracted from the *Sutta Nipāta* of the *Pāli* Canon. The imagery of this poem recalls the metaphoric elements of a lesson the Buddha gives to a devatā in *Samyutta Nikāya* 1:1 “Crossing over the Flood,” in order to “subdue her pride” according to translator Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu (*Handful of Leaves Vol. Three* 1). When she asks the Buddha how he crossed over the flood, he answers “without pushing

forward, without staying in place.” The devatā believes that her understanding of the *Dhamma* is advanced, and yet, she cannot make sense out of the Buddha’s language in this case, since she had not yet trained herself to full awakening. The use of paradoxical language for Vanessa’s map—language viewed by both her and Kai—is similarly effective at subduing their pride and simultaneously sparking their imaginations to consider the path and seek a birth that allows them to practice further.

As mentioned earlier, *Cloud Atlas* is less concerned with the internal causes of reincarnation—how to avoid future rebirth does not crack Mitchell’s narrative. John Mullan, claims that *Cloud Atlas* is most concerned with what he calls “narrative reincarnation: the re-enactment of common conflicts” (Mullan, “Guardian Book Club”). In the book’s close, Mitchell returns to his presentation of how society should work to “transcend tooth and claw,” although Ewing admits that such a lofty goal, “is the hardest of worlds to make real” (508). The narratives of *Cloud Atlas*, indeed “reincarnate” this theme of transcendence across various places and times—but it is a transcendence that is tied to the inevitable ups and downs of the world. Mitchell’s transcendence is very different from the Theravāda Buddhist theme of *The Unravelers*, which suggests the potential ending of becoming. As the poetry teaches the characters: once the arrow of craving is removed, there is no place to run to, and no one to sink.

Another variation of a loosely woven multi-narrator text is Native American novelist Gordon Henry’s *The Light People*, in which the story is passed quickly between narrators like a baton. This technique creates a more continuous narrative than Mitchell with fewer time gaps and results in an even richer tapestry of voices to convey the storytelling style of a particular traditional culture—in Henry’s example, that of the Chippewa. Henry uses not only first and third person narrative, but also first person essay, letters and other documents, drama, prayer, and poetry to produce both dynamic

and succinct chapters sometimes akin to *The Unravelers*. *The Unravelers*, however, cannot be considered an assemblage like *The Light People* and does not approach the number of distinct voices found in Henry's novel. *The Unraveler's* narrative structure, instead, is situated somewhere *between* Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas*, and Henry's *The Light People*. *Cloud Atlas* and *The Unravelers* both rely on multiple first-person narrators, but my novel integrates a wide variety of supplementary forms, in the mode of Henry that carry additional voices of another culture—in my case an Indian Buddhist one—into the text.

The use of additional narrative forms allows me enfold many *suttas* from the *Pāli* Canon surreptitiously into my novel. From the *suttas* I borrowed much of the novel's poetry (*Sutta Nipāta* 4.2, 4.15, and *Udāna* 7:4) and the prologue's creation myth—a story told in the voice of The Guild rather than one of the four narrators—which was based on two *suttas* (Ṭhānissaro, *The Paradox of Becoming* 15-17; *Digha Nikāya* 1 and 27). Invented text that synthesizes a variety of *suttas* is also found, such as the advice from The Guild sprinkled throughout on topics such as karma or fabrication. Invented text based on *suttas* is located in Kairos' Colorado chapters, existing there as flawed and incomplete meditation instructions, such as the corporate language pasted in as the Contact contract in "Kairos: Day 2, The Contract" (242-43), and as automated instructions from Contact to begin "Kairos: Day 3, Night" (260-61). Aspects of the *suttas* descriptions of becoming can also be found in yet another form, Vanessa's letter to Jules (160-61).

A final example of the enfolding of the *suttas* in *The Unravelers*, is the use of song from *Pāli* Canon in block text, delivered in the *suttas* by a Gandhabba—a lower class of deva, a celestial musician. The Gandhabbas are comparable to the trickster entities depicted in Native American lure in *The Light People*—a resonance between the

characters of these novels in this case, rather than an influence. In the *Pāli* Canon, Gandhabbas are not necessarily a positive or a negative influence—they are just deluded in believing their sensual aims will bring them long-term happiness.

The Gandhabbas/“three boys” appear throughout my novel, but most notably as the “three musicians,” singing their song about love, which is attributed to them in *Digha Nikāya* 21 (Thānissaro, *The Buddha Smiles* 28-29). The three musicians sing to encourage beings—who are on a train heading to the lower realms—to take a lover (80, 88). The odd timing of their train serenade of Leo and Vanessa—who are still processing Leo’s rape—displays the trickster nature of the three musicians and general disharmony with Buddhist practice. Overall, the integration of a wide variety of narrative form and voice allows for the surreptitious use of the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon—a practice essential in my aim of writing a novel that explores *Pāli* Canon’s literary potential.

In addition to the above discussion of integration of material from the *suttas* and experimental narrative modes of using multiple first-person narration and additional supplementary forms, an addendum follows which specifies two occasional but distinct uses of voice (second person and first-person plural) that help to further convey the nuances of karma, and the presentation of constructing or deconstructing an identity through the process of becoming.

In Keith Kachtick’s Buddhist novel *Hungry Ghost*, he gives an explanation within the narrative for his use of voice (in this case choosing to use second person.) Kachtick addresses the womanizing protagonist, Carter Cox—who is Buddhist and considering Buddhist ideas—directly throughout the novel. Kachtick brings back the discussion of second person briefly much later in the novel (302) but otherwise the transparent use of the device is present only in the below excerpt.

In recent weeks you’ve wondered if it isn’t better for people to always

think of themselves in second person, to fully disassociate their awareness from the obstructing, lower-self “I” that thinks in terms of “me” and “mine” and “may I unbutton your blouse now, please?” You tell yourself again that to spiritualize your desires, you must desire to be without desire. That the spiritual path takes willpower . . . (14).

Kachtick uses second person in a way that allows the reader to experience the main character, but only at arm’s length. As Carter learns to be less of a slave to his lust and more open to love, this technique also gives the reader a taste of one aspect of the meditative experience—Carter as the “lower-self ‘I’” and the reader as the higher self who maintains at least a little separation. This element of stepping back through Buddhist meditation aids in the disidentification with voices of the mind so that the meditator can choose in each moment to develop the skillful voices, and weaken the unskillful ones. *The Unravelers* does not use second person in order to “spiritualize” desire, as Kachtick says above, or to bypass it, but does make use of the way second person allows the characters (and through them, the reader) to step back from habitual forms of craving and to develop more skillful qualities instead.

The use of the second person in *The Unravelers* largely follows the Buddha’s second cognition—the cosmological mode—where a being is able to instruct another, from a higher vantage point, about the long-term results of various actions including different types of birth. This occurs when a member of The Guild addresses Vanessa and the other “fish” of the world through the prologue, or through writing—such as when the deva guide is threaded into Vanessa’s black room. Vanessa herself narrates in second person when she presents the possibility that Leo will take a short next life, or when she addresses Kai, detailing how becoming works from the pavilion. These teaching and guiding moments only occur later in the novel once Vanessa has obtained a higher level

of refinement. Besides Vanessa, the teaching voice of the second person is found in the novel's poetry and in the authoritative voice of The Guild, language and ideas which are largely borrowed from the *Pāli* Canon as previously mentioned. The communication between characters occasionally occurs through second person as well—such as when Kai questions Vanessa.

I start asking questions.

Is there a turn that I missed? Are there other options? I know change is hard. So what can I do first? This is where you come in. Your answer goes here: _____

Well?

I sleep. I have the strangest dreams. I step from room to room. I hear your voice through every door. (192)

In these teaching instances, the use of second person demonstrates karmic connections—the characters' rooms are often open to the influence of one another even when they are seemingly alone. Second person in *The Unravelers* often involves one character's presentation to another of the potential effects of acting on a given desire. In these cases, the protagonist who is being directed has additional opportunities to act in the most skillful way possible and to thereby produce and enter the most conducive worlds to Buddhist practice. The creation and entering of worlds themselves in *The Unravelers* is more directly approached through the constant shifting between past and present tense as discussed in the last chapter of this essay.

First person plural (the “we voice”) is another deviation in the typical first-person voice used in the novel, and like second person, is reserved for a specific type of instance, namely, to show karmic connections between a geographic area of beings (as in the chapter of “New Yorkers”) or to draw parallels between the experiences of birth and

death common to all realms of beings. Kai narrates the 9-11 story of “New Yorkers” in first-person plural—a voice able to present a wide variety of experience simultaneously while suggesting even more—in order to articulate the voice and emotion of the entire New York region after the terrorist attacks.

The use of first person plural was used in the novel, *The Wives of Los Alamos* (2014) by TaraShea Nesbit. Nesbit developed a flexible version of first person plural voice enabling her to occasionally center on individual women in her story: “Or Genevieve tapped on our window at ten thirty A.M. She shouted, though we were right in front of her: *Our stuff was dropped on Japan* . . . That’s what she said, *Our stuff*. Any other word, like *bomb*, was more than we were ready to admit to” (185).

In the opening to the chapter of “New Yorkers,” *The Unravelers* provides an explanation for the shift into this voice of oneness (much like the transparency Kachtick provides in his use of second person, cited above): “We were one in our mortality, and we also remembered that however long we had forgotten this, we always were” (164). *The Unravelers* uses the first-person plural voice slightly differently than Nesbit. “New Yorkers” is told from the collective we, but is increasingly centered on Kai within it, which also makes his disidentification possible and not jarring when the voice switches to first person at the conclusion of the chapter. The Narrative shifts in voice track changes in Kai’s identification with the region, which move from: “We had come to work that day from our Manhattan apartments, from town homes in the burrows, or from an hour away: out east on The Island, to the west from Jersey, or up north—what the ‘real’ New Yorkers called ‘up-state,’” (164) to identifying with a smaller group of friends on Long Island:

We stayed on the porch and drank in pairs of two or three, or we watched our friends drink and thought how strange of those inside, to cover emotion by watching a baseball game, or we watched the game inside and

thought the same of those who outside covered it all over with beer. Or we didn't think, we just covered over, covered over. (166)

Finally, the voice disidentifies entirely with the region and group of friends by the end of the chapter, as evidence by his change back into a singular first person:

I stepped back but bumped into people behind me who carried me forward within their lustful chant, walking down the ramps. The stadium roared at the second out, and the clapping and chanting from above grew as new people laughed and woo-hooed and joined the exit party, rhythmically moving down into the darkness, chanting again: "Kill Bin-La-din." (171)

The changing voices highlight the process of birth: the way beings assume an identity within a world of becoming.

The Guild also uses first-person plural but in a less changeable application, such as when narrating the feasting on the flavor-earth by the gods in the prologue, which precipitates their fall. This voice not only draws attention to the universality of the understanding of those who have experienced awakening, but is also used to universalize suffering of those who return to birth (6-11). Another example is when Vanessa employs first-person plural when narrating her final section when she jumps toward rebirth, drawing parallels between herself and the process by which other beings also take birth (284-85).

The first-person plural is also used in the *suttas*, such as *Majjhima Nikāya* 66 when Venerable Udayin expresses his appreciation to the Buddha for the monk's rules he formulated such as not going for alms at night. Venerable Udayin switches back and forth between first person plural and first person singular as he provides examples of the problems that befell monks formally while on almsround at night where they "walked into waste water . . . sleeping cow[s] . . . young hooligans . . . [were] propositioned by

women” or the time Venerable Udayin was mistaken for a demon. He repeats his reflection in the first-person plural, “So many painful things has the Blessed One taken away from us! So many pleasant things has he brought us! So many unskillful qualities has the Blessed One taken away from us! So many skillful qualities has he brought us!” (328). This use of first-person plural here depicts a cohesive sangha at the time of the Buddha, united even behind the seeming difficulties of following the monastic code. The voice is used similarly, but in a more initial stage of the practice, in the opening and closing of *The Unravelers* to depict the rewards of the practice and drawbacks of birth. When also considering “Kairos: New Yorkers,” my novel’s use of first-person plural, overall, highlights the universal problems of craving, becoming, birth, and death for all beings.

Beek writes that Buddhist fiction, “derives its connections to Buddhism by way of extending modes of Buddhist narration into contexts that are not necessarily Asian. The modes of Buddhist narration may have traditional antecedents . . . [or] may be something new, something changed.” Such traditional antecedents for *The Unravelers* can be found throughout the *suttas* such as the Buddha’s three cognitions from *Majjhima Nikāya* 19 that was especially influential in establishing voice and structure. My novel then carries these traditional narrative modes into the new context of North American and European literature where they were also made new by further developing them within this new context.

The expansion of a single first person into the use of multiple first-person narrative structure of *The Unravelers*, as in *Cloud Atlas*, is an elaboration of the traditional first-person Buddhist narrative mode of the Buddha’s first cognition in the *suttas*. The characters of *The Unravelers* are shown frequently looking back through first person accounts like the Buddha did in his “*knowledge of recollecting my past lives*”

(*Majjhima Nikāya* 19) before changing their current aims and behavior. The interweaving of multiple first-person narrators creates a new narrative mode for the Buddhist novel, one that diversifies the depiction of the Theravāda understanding of karma among the characters of *The Unravelers* and in their development of right view. My novel, however, does not remain limited to the narrator's reports of their actions, but includes additional voices, instructions, myth, song, and poetry as inspired or even copied from the *suttas* whenever possible. Such a wider variety of narrators and narrative form, is exemplified in the Native American context by *The Light People*, but can also be tied back all the way to the *Udāna* from the *suttas* where exclamations in verse provide a distillation of each story's lesson from the Buddha's vantage point.

The second person voice was useful in *The Unravelers* when characters teach one another—an observer voice not completely unlike what Kachtick uses in *Hungry Ghost*, although perhaps more similar to the voice Ajaan Lee and other Thai Forest teachers occasionally slide into during a *dhamma* talks to address their audiences directly. Finally, first-person plural is used also when instructing or when building a Buddhist group identity (as in The Guild's prologue and the prologue's various repetitions throughout the novel) or when dismantling a societal one (as in "New Yorkers"). The use of second person and third person plural can be differentiated from their use in *Hungry Ghost* and *The Wives of Los Alamos* by how, as experimental narrative modes in *The Unravelers*, they expand the traditional cosmological narrative mode of the Buddha's second cognition—"knowledge of the passing away & reappearance of beings." Viewed together, these narrative techniques build on much of the tradition of the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon while bringing that tradition into the Buddhist novel through a literary and experimental type of Buddhist fiction.

III. Constructing and Deconstructing Literary Worlds

The combination of the literary techniques from the *suttas* from the *Pāli* Canon and contemporary literature along with *rasa*, which is discussed in the next section, provide the vehicle through which *The Unravelers* presents its ideas. However, without the ideas themselves as preserved in the *suttas*—becoming, fabrication, and dispassion—my novel would not only lack its core concepts, but also the ideas on which its structure and style is based. This short section returns to becoming, fabrication, and dispassion discussed in the introduction, this time to explore how they provide the underpinnings of my narrative and especially how I have utilized and elaborated on them through my characters.

Becoming

The introduction to this essay discussed becoming in terms of its psychological and cosmological modes—or in other words, the micro and macro levels of this process that produces birth. Within my novel, both levels of this concept are evident. On the micro scale, becoming is especially apparent during moments of character change. One example is in Vanessa's farewell letter to her lover, Jules, in the chapter "Vanessa: First Light." Vanessa equates the process of becoming to the creation of stories, writing, "Becoming. Memory. Among their tangle, I imagine endless stories I will never retrieve. Are we trying to recover ourselves? Or recover from ourselves?" Later in the same letter, Vanessa notes that these stories, these worlds of becoming, often entrap her in her own words. "I will not forget you as I go," she writes, "although you will forget yourself before too long. Becoming. Memory. Within this tangle, there are stories that claim me. Of any true end, I can't say . . . Imagine dropping one identity as we will drop our story. Or our last letters, rearranging on a page" (160-61). Vanessa leaves behind her story, both literally and metaphorically. With her letter, she sheds her identity as a rape victim, an identity that Jules encouraged her to hold onto. At the same time, Vanessa proposes

that there is a freedom within this loss, demonstrated by her ability to consider a wide variety of options she had not previously considered such as graduate school or independent travel. These possibilities of a positive (although limited) freedom, initiated by Vanessa consciously, can be considered becoming on the micro scale. As Vanessa's narrative continues from the deva realms following her human death, the reader again witnesses two hallmarks of becoming, this time on a macro scale: a change of location and relatedly, of identity. In her next chapters, "Gears" and "Crossing" Vanessa continues to learn how to expand her choices in the present moment. "I dive through curving lines," she says, "between rooms, brushing all my history of action" (175). Eventually, Vanessa embraces the new identity of a guide, but the interspersing of her human chapters such as "First Light" demonstrate that her expansive birth is a result of learning how to manipulate becoming on both the micro and macro scale.

The radical change of worlds at death remains a focus throughout the novel in order to highlight the implications of the moment-to-moment acts of craving and becoming. When any character continues to narrate his or her next chapter (whether it comes immediately, or after that of another narrator), their world of becoming has changed because the craving they are acting on has changed. This remains true regardless of whether or not a character has also experienced a physical death. In either case, we can say in each new chapter that the narrator is not entirely the same person as they were previously. The form of *The Unravelers* brings attention to the fluidity of identity as narrators shed a chapter (or even threads of text) like exiting a chrysalis and move into new worlds, or the "next room." In this way, the structure of the narrative also embodies becoming. The form of the novel highlights the existence of worlds within worlds—old cravings and identities that still reside within new ones, and new cravings and identities being born out of the old ones.

Becoming is often depicted in the novel as something positive when a character is acting on a skillful intention. However, becoming is also depicted as traumatic, as it can just as easily occur based on a poor decision, or as a result of bad past karma—for example when the characters are living at a time of tragedy which they cannot control. In “New Yorkers,” Kai’s 9-11 narrative just over half-way through the book, Kai reflects on the terrifying implications of the terrorist attacks, and of becoming and birth in general:

It might not have been the end of our society, but it was close enough, and we now knew what disaster smelt like, how it would linger with us, and how one day—whether it be in a global or private way—we would have to step through our windows too, like those jumpers holding hands and falling after their decision between flames and freefall had been made.

(164)

The historic context of the event helps to demonstrate the universal aspect of becoming. “New Yorkers” emphasizes that the process of becoming eventually demands that each individual must make choices at death about where to be born next. “New Yorkers” also demonstrates how becoming operates on the level of societal change, but only while emphasizing the importance of mastering the internal act of creating worlds.

As a demonstration of how beings shift location on a macro scale, the novel takes place on several realms of being: the hell realms, the hungry ghost realm, the human realm, and a variety of deva and brahma realms (celestial beings). *The Unravelers*’ resulting weave of stories presents both Buddhist content and a form consistent with the process of becoming—building worlds out of intention and stepping from one world into another as experienced by both protagonists and the reader. The novel depicts how beings are born of their actions by depicting the karma (drawbacks) of actions motivated by greed, anger, and delusion, and the karma (rewards) of actions that are motivated by more

skillful intentions. The narrators in *The Unravelers* are repeatedly reborn through threads, or screens, or traps (depending on the past karma each protagonist brings into the rebirth experience), and into mental states and memories which they shape. In one of his last chapters, “Designs,” Leo is presented with a concrete example of the process of becoming—his own drawings of the realms he designed and then lived in. Leo narrates:

I can’t help but get a little excited. I mean, some of them are pretty clever. “Yeah, I did this,” I say, pointing to the maze where you can jump over the pits until, surprise, you land on the knives. Where you can step over the knives until you fall into the molten pits. Where you can crawl through a maze right into the box of flames. I spent lifetimes designing the circuit and even more living in it. (199)

Leo’s development along the Buddhist path is depicted in his realization that he does not have to suffer based on his past karma alone—he has more freedom to shape his present experience than he at first realizes. As he actively looks for other options, his perception of the limitations imposed by his past karma designs lifts, and he perceives a way out of his designs. In its form and content, *The Unravelers* is a demonstration and exploration of how beings, through the process of becoming, both shape and live inside their worlds.

Becoming is also depicted on the macro scale by Vanessa in her chapter “Seeds.” This scene is one of the first times Vanessa enters her “black room,” and as can be seen from her level of insight into becoming in the passage that follows, Vanessa is, in many ways, the most developed among the four main narrators in her understanding of becoming.

And for each seed for which the conditions are right, a sapling rises from the earth, and right there a world begins. I see beings in each seed finding a home in a cauldron filled with liquid metal, others on trains, or in the

sea, and others like me, awed and immobilized by the sheer possibilities of the infinite rooms all around—the creators and the destroyers alike in their hapless wandering on. (48)

Her understanding of how the principle of becoming applies to diverse experience is reflected in the variety of her imagery, including her synthesis of the urban and the natural, in contrast to the confinement and self-absorption of Leo's imagery.

Fabrication

The process of shaping, or fabricating, worlds (literary and otherwise) is one way the human mind produces and consumes experience out of the raw materials around it. From the Buddhist point of view, we are always in the middle of such a conscious and unconscious world-creation categorized as bodily, verbal, and mental fabrication in the previously mentioned *Samyutta Nikāya* 12:2 and throughout the *Pāli* Canon. Our experience of the present moment can be viewed as a fabrication as much as any story is—although in *The Unravelers*, like most stories, the emotions are condensed and heightened.

Vanessa's black room, a place she enters throughout the novel, is one of many examples of a character fabricating a world before he or she enters it. Each mind fabricates meaning, words, feelings, and images based on information received by the senses according to their past karma (past action, which also includes mental skills which one carries into the present experience) and present karma (present intentions one adds in the moment). Vanessa's black room is a visual presentation of her past karma—the interpersonal connections with others physically linger around her as strings she manipulates, and as rooms she can enter.

The characters' intentions determine how their present experience will develop, what situation they will move towards, and even which options are perceived as possible within each set of new choices. When the characters in *The Unravelers* practice appropriate attention, they are learning a skill of developing the path (the fourth noble truth), fabricating the present moment in a way that can produce more choices and better long-term states of becoming. When developed at least to a rudimentary level, this skill allows the characters to let go of grosser states of becoming, in favor of more refined ones.

In the book's opening, however, characters such as Kai and Vanessa demonstrate little skill as they experience their death. Vanessa clings to the desire to save the beings around her who are unavoidably about to die—an understandable human response, but a problem she has to work through in the worlds she enters after death. Just as beings might have limited choices at death due to past karma, Vanessa is similarly limited in who she can help. This is a lesson that the novel demonstrates later in Vanessa's inability to help Jules.

As for Kai, when his car first slips off the road in the canyons, he is similarly in a disadvantageous mental state. He is directionless and bewildered, his mind jumps between a return to Isabel in Colorado, or to his original home in New York, and then seemingly inexplicably, he recollects Vanessa (who will eventually serve as his guide) as he crashes to his death. The resulting states of becoming after Kai's death are, like Vanessa's, confused and directionless. However, he comes to realize through Vanessa's help that he is dead and can now consider new choices. As he works with Vanessa throughout the novel, his bewilderment eventually ceases, and he has the chance to be reborn again along the Great Divide. At the end, when he re-experiences the crash, he is directed and more purposeful in his fabrication: "I turn the quartz arrowhead toward the

west to confirm my decision . . . the rock fin becomes a ribbon beside me . . . I turn and step toward the ribbon, the path cutting through time, and I let go of the car; I let go of the window” (283-84). The appearance of the path has obvious Buddhist metaphorical implications pertaining to what type of birth Kai may be moving toward, a path that Vanessa sees also. Vanessa describes her final image of her pending rebirth likewise, as, “old tunnel-threads that we pull ourselves out of, by weaving them into a path.” (285).

One reason there is repetition of images and the re-visitation of scenes throughout the novel is to demonstrate that the characters always have a say in how their worlds are constructed and also in how they relate to them—although, admittedly, the characters don’t always see any other choices until a second or third time through the same experience. This highlights the power of fabrication in the process of creating and entering worlds and draws a parallel between the protagonists, and the reading and writing of the novel. These scenes are an opportunity for readers to make new meaning out of representations of earlier text as the reader becomes better acquainted with the novel’s Buddhist lens.

To borrow from one of *The Unravelers* central metaphors: because Kai, Vanessa, and Leo get proficient enough at unweaving their unskillful stories, they begin to see how this process of fabrication is ongoing and entrapping them. Once the characters gain insight into how they fabricate their worlds, they see how their past habit of world-building for the sake of housing craving is a dead-end. As they then look for release, they find the path at the end of the novel where they can continue to practice the skill of fabrication in order to build worlds conducive to stepping out of worlds entirely.

Dispassion

If fabrication is the process through which worlds are built, then dispassion is the means

through which worlds are undone. Many of the initial human life flashbacks in *The Unravelers* are driven by excitement and wonder—Kairos diving into his memory of riding out to sea on a tire tube, Jules on vacation with her family, Vanessa rushing home to gather a bouquet of flowers. However, the exhilaration does not last, and the narrators present their worlds as largely disappointing, confusing, even arbitrary, as their pleasures and intentions do not deliver the lasting happiness they were expecting. All the characters take missteps into self-made prison-worlds that they cannot easily escape, most obviously in the hells of Jules and Leo, created due to their fixation on emotional and physical food respectively. Mistakes are also depicted on the micro scale, such as when Kairos steps into his obsessive thinking with the help of the virtual reality/memory retrieval system of “Contact”—another visual representation of how beings enter and are entrapped by their thought worlds and craving, this time through screens.

While the characters continue to fabricate and enter into states of becoming, they also become more conscious that they are living within the karma of their choices. It is their appropriate attention to the issue of stress and suffering that eventually gives rise to distaste, disillusionment, and dispassion for their worlds. Although the characters in *The Unravelers* are not on the brink of awakening, they are able to end more rudimentary levels of stress through dispassion for the states of becoming that have trapped them. This dispassion is what allows the characters to attend appropriately to the third noble truth: the cessation of suffering, at least to the degree each is able, and to step out of their self-made boxes at the novel’s conclusion. The characters depict different aspects of one of the key paradoxes of the Buddha’s teachings, the use of becoming in order to get beyond it.

The Unravelers depicts the opening of the characters’ journey toward ending stress through dispassion. In this way, I intend to highlight the rewards of dispassion for

the reader as well. To achieve this through the techniques of contemporary fiction I attempted to immerse the reader within the world of the novel and share in the characters' struggles and release. But to truly achieve this immersion and empathy, another tool was needed.

IV. *Rasa*

History

If the reader is going to take birth within an author's literary world, there must be something to incite the reader's desire to fully enter it. The many layers of becoming in the novel must remain attractive destinations in order to keep the reader in the literary world continually. In short: to enter and remain in a literary world, the reader needs to enter a world of becoming. They must enjoy the meal provided by the work, to savor it. The savor, *rasa*, is what Warder calls a "sweet aesthetic experience." *Rasa* not only provides the enjoyment to keep the reader engaged, but if done skillfully, can even make the medicine of the Buddhist teachings "drinkable" (vol. I 85). It has been used to that end since some of the earliest Buddhist *kāvya* texts.

The *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a handbook for actors, is the first extant work on Indian *kāvya* and was compiled by Bharata between the 1st century B.C.E. and the 4th century C.E. (Patnaik 4). Warder writes: the "aesthetics [of drama] in turn became the theory of all of [the arts]" (Warder, vol. I 33). Of central importance in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*'s analysis was the audience experience of a specific type of delight, the "tasting" of emotions depicted on stage, savored at one remove. Some of the emotions depicted in the work would be unpleasant to experience directly, but the *rasa* of even sad or disturbed emotions can actually be enjoyed. For example, none of the tragedies depicted in the novel—sudden death, rape, torture, separation between loved ones—would actually be enjoyable to

experience, so the taste of these tragic experiences that is enjoyed when reading is something a little different.

Rasa theory probably arose through trial and error in the actors' practice imitating the world and emotions (Warder, vol. I 26). These actors found eight main emotions and eight corresponding tastes. The taste was found to be "sensitive" in the depiction of love, "comic" in humor, "compassionate" in grief, "furious" in anger, and "heroic" in energy, "apprehensive" in fear, "horrific" in disgust, and "marvelous" (henceforth "astounding") in the rendering of astonishment (Warder, vol. I 23). This separation between the emotions portrayed on one hand and the experience of the spectator on the other was what Bharata pointed to as "the aesthetic objective of dramatic presentation" (Patnaik 4), or *rasa*—a theory perhaps unique in the whole of aesthetic theory today in its categorization of emotional response (Warder, vol. I xiii-xiv).

The term *rasa*, has been in use for at least 5,000 years. It was mentioned frequently in the *Upaniṣads* and in ancient medicine where it took on the meaning of essence, and also flavor in the culinary context. Warder explains, the *Nāṭyaśāstra* "uses the analogy of cookery for the art of the theatre" (Warder, vol. I 22). Thus, *rasa* is most often translated as "aesthetic relish" or "savor" (Patnaik 14-18). The connotations of essence still linger, as *rasa* might be seen as "an intensification of a particular emotion" (Patnaik 55) distilling the "everyday 'psychological' level of emotions portrayed in the characters" to the "aesthetic level" of experience—the filtered juice that is savored by an enrapt audience (Warder, vol. I xiv).

Rasa is brought into being like a carefully prepared dish that relies on a variety of ingredients. The work of art combines the taste of a basic emotion (*bhāva*), acted out in speech and gesture, and combines it with the spice of additional emotions, causes (*vibhāvas*) and effects (*anubhāva*) all beautifully expressed in order to produce *rasa*

(Warder, vol. I 21-23). All aspects of a work of art are “entirely subordinate to the purpose of producing ‘aesthetic experience’ *rasa*” (Warder, vol. I 10). Therefore, for art to be effective, it must be both convincing and engaging, for as Bharata warns, “the audience will not accept the story, and other content of a play, unless it produces *rasa* in them” (Warder, vol. I 21).

The Karma of Reading a Buddhist *Kāvya*

Karma is not only paramount in the Buddhist teachings, but it is also plays a central role within *rasa* and the *suttas* that employ it to purposefully impact the audience. There was a historic partnership between those who recognized the distinctive karma of compiling, reading, and practicing the traditional Buddhist texts, and those inspired enough to preserve or read them. Warder discusses this relationship between writer and reader in India even more broadly when he writes,

The true connoisseur of literature in India was by most critics taken to be engaged in a kind of contemplation of life as there presented, perhaps not unlike the meditation or reflection of a philosopher or even of a withdrawn ascetic . . . instruction of a wide view of the world extending far beyond his everyday experience. (Warder, vol. I xiii-xiv)

It is unreasonable to expect that those born in North America and Europe to read a Buddhist novel today in the same way Indians would have read a Buddhist text a few thousand years ago in India. Buddhist beliefs are varied, some categorically different from anything that preceded them in North America and Europe, and it will take time for us to become skilled readers of the early Buddhist *kāvyas*. Reading a single Buddhist novel, such as *The Unravelers*, will not accomplish a major shift in our approach to

Buddhist literature all by itself. Still, it is worth considering what a re-attunement of our reading in this largely unexplored Buddhist context could potentially look like in time.

One example of a cultural change in how art is approached is found in Peter Gay's *The Naked Heart: The Bourgeois Experience, Victoria to Freud*, Vol. 4 (1995), which details the methods by which nineteenth-century Europeans were purposely re-educated by the early Romantics to listen to music in a new manner. One aspect of the new Romantic sensibility was the German advocacy for *Affektenlehre*: "the doctrine that it is the business of music to stir the feelings of composer, performer, and audience alike" (Gay 13). The Romantic movement was responsible for elevating music from the lowest of the arts (15) to one in which it was regarded, not only as superior to other arts, but even regarded as religion (24-25). To express their devotion, listeners were taught to remain in "silence during" and to express "enthusiasm [only] *after* each act" (25). Goethe wrote to the public official in charge of a local court theatre to stop audience "irregularities" by instructing that "no sign of impatience is permitted to occur" and that "[d]isapproval may draw attention to itself only through silence, approval only through applause [after the performance]" (qtd. in Gay 18-19). Similarly, conductors at the time stopped performances to give lectures to the audience on etiquette (19).

This re-education ran counter to the impulse to gesture and call out while listening to music (22). But perhaps a larger issue at the time, was the audience's propensity to not listen at all, to socialize, buy drinks, even hire a prostitute from the edges of the room (14-17), practices so common that they even drove the way music was written. For example, Rossini designed part of an opera to be "deliberately monotonous" so that his audience would have the chance to "spoon ices" (16). In drawing a parallel between the climate in which music was listened to before the change in early nineteenth-century Europe, and the climate in North America and Europe in which the Buddhist texts are

currently read today, we might pose the metaphorical questions: 1) Have we fallen into habitual ways of reading and interpreting texts that obscure what is distinct in the Buddhist teachings? What reading habits do we bring to Buddhist novels that might be equated to spooning ices on the side of the room while listening to an opera? 2) What is the music in Buddhist literature that we might be turning a deaf ear to? Are there whole stanzas of meaning that we have skipped over? Are the aims of the *suttas* at dispassion an entire key for which we simply have not developed a taste?

The Romantic re-education made music an increasingly inward experience, producing some rapid changes that lead music reviewer E. T. A. Hoffmann at the beginning of the nineteenth-century to already call music “the most romantic of all the arts” (qtd. in Gay 26) because it “discloses to humanity an unknown domain, a world of the senses that surrounds it,” or as Gay summarizes, music was reintroduced as an experience of “[t]he most intimate depths of the self creating an infinite reverie” (27). Gay details the audience in rapture (32-33), and sobbing and weeping (27-28) within the profundity of their newfound internal music experience. The way in which music was *attended to* by its audience changed the way it was experienced.

In order for readers in present day North America and Europe to attend to Theravāda Buddhist literature within its own context, another re-education regarding which type of experience to seek out as we read will be necessary. Buddhist perceptions historically presented in a way to produce dispassion, are now viewed almost exclusively as a cause for celebration. One example is interconnection, which is taught in the *Pāli* Canon as a primary cause of suffering—we feed on one another physically and emotionally in order to survive. The *Pāli* Canon presents interconnection as motivation to get out of this system of feeding entirely. Largely due to the popularity of Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, regardless of what Buddhist school one affiliates with in North

America and Europe, interconnection is most often presented as the unity that we can take refuge in. Similarly, the goal of Oneness, and its accompanying sense of emotional ecstasy, has come to overlay the primary means to the goal of awakening in the *suttas*: dispassion and renunciation. As discussed below, the re-education in these qualities that *The Unravelers* provides, occurs largely through *rasa*.

Writing about the application of traditional Indian *rasa* theory in contemporary literature, Priyadarshi Patnaik in his book, *Rasa in Aesthetics* (2004), observes the connection between how the author presents a topic through literature and how the reader experiences it. Patnaik explains that the subject is not the most crucial element utilized by the author when shaping a work's specific *rasa*. He writes, "in itself, nothing is the subject of love or sorrow. Every situation has the potential of all the *rasas*" (128). It might seem that *kāvya*'s inherent elasticity is therefore not a good choice to apply to a Buddhist novel which aims to present atypical ideas. After all, what would stop readers in North America and Europe from interpreting *The Unravelers* in a way more congruent with their particular world views, or to search for emotional experience in the text that the author did not intend? But as Patnaik points out, the author's main tool is presenting "the perspective or the point of view from which things are seen" (128). This perspective makes all the difference in which *rasa* is produced

There are ultimately two ways in which the experience of *rasa* can be marshaled. The first way is through the author's general presentation of the material and the second is more specifically to guide the reader to an understanding of what the author is trying to achieve through the work. First, the author's role presenting the experience of *rasa* depends on the skill with which he or she allows one element to come forward in a particular scene and another to recede. This will directly influence which *rasa* will be

experienced by the reader. Patnaik concludes, “it is the **treatment**, the way of looking at things (even a corpse) that will decide the *rasa* [aesthetic experience]” (116).

The second way to marshal the experience of *rasa* is to guide the experience of the reader by suggesting how the reader might interpret the author’s efforts. This way of shaping the experience of *rasa* is determined by how the reader perceives which reading experience the text and author are attempting to produce—and most of all, what the reader expects the text *should* do for them. If a reader is looking for profound expressions of interconnection in a Buddhist novel, for example, they are likely to find it, while ignoring any ideas that conflict. Therefore, *kāvya* and its essential *rasa* theory, here, call for the education of the audience to help bring the perspectives of the reader and the novel together.

Patnaik explains that “what is found in the work, in the way it is written” is ultimately transferable due to “the Indian concept of *sahṛdaya* (the sympathetic perceiver) [which dictates that] we must remember that the work has been written in a specific way and is supposed to be read in a certain manner.” As Patnaik explains, the potential for a more diverse reader response outside of India can be mitigated by educating the audience about how to read a particular *kāvya* (128-29). This layer of education was especially necessary in the case of *The Unravelers* in order to communicate and separate Theravāda Buddhist virtues and practices from the eclectic Buddhism of the Buddhist novel influenced by Mayahana and Vajrayana. The resulting Theravāda Buddhist *rasas* of *The Unravelers* are addressed in detail in the other sub-sections of section IV.

Not only is the methodology of *The Unravelers* based on *kāvya*, but as a Theravāda Buddhist *kāvya*, it was created in part to move an audience in North America and Europe toward a reading that is more appreciative of dispassion. *The Unravelers*

aims to educate its audience on how to attend to the novel in a way consistent with the *suttas* through the novel's presentation of form, narrative development, and characterization. When successful, a novel's *rasa* can be more than simply tasting emotions; Patnaik adds that, "a way of *seeing* things is [also] being generated" (128). *The Unravelers* aims at producing *rasa* consistent with the Theravāda Buddhist path, while also presenting a Theravāda Buddhist way of viewing the world.

The training as presented through the first-person narration of the characters in *The Unravelers* (and therefore a training that is also available for the reader) is to develop dispassion for the ordinary way life is lived, and to turn away from—rather than looking for completion in—the world. The path of the four narrators of *The Unravelers* teach the reader to look for connections between actions and the results of those actions, and to think long term about where action can lead if trained. In other words, the discovery is not that life is already good as it is, but that individuals must be heedful of their choices. *The Unravelers* presents a Buddhist understanding of the world—it is through actions that the characters are setting their own traps and creating the conditions through which they will either see or obscure the escape routes.

In Theravāda Buddhism, the heart of the teaching is the development of a specific way of viewing experience, "appropriate attention," which the Buddha called the most important internal factor for awakening (*Itivuttaka*: 1.16). Appropriate attention is the Buddhist choice to view all phenomena in terms of the four noble truths: stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path which leads to its cessation. Throughout the text, *The Unravelers* suggests that we see our existence through our own acts of world-creation: as a process that is stressful, that can never satisfy craving long-term, and a process that is best honed in such a way that gives rise to dispassion toward habitually creating new worlds (that is, if one wants release). The protagonists are shown throughout the novel

dragged around by their craving: Leo hungers constantly for drugs and food, Kairos for his lost lover, Jules for the extreme highs and lows of experience, while Vanessa's cravings pull against one another—she wants revenge on Leo, but also to save those beings that have fallen. These characters' development of appropriate attention spans the entire arc of the novel and shapes the narrative.

The cultivation of this Buddhist way of seeing is modelled by the ways in which classic Buddhist texts are read and experienced by the protagonists. On her map, Vanessa sees portions of two canonical poems originally from the *Sutta Nipāta* 4.2 and 4.15. The poems are seen only when Vanessa attends appropriately to the world around her in terms of stress and craving. In these moments, in the poems, the beings of the world are viewed as fish in drying puddles, fighting each other down to their last breath despite the fact that they are all inevitably going to die. Vanessa sees a poem first from afar that shocks her with its presentation of dispassion (112-13). In response to the poem, she enters a window back to New York where she remembers how to meditate—that is, she remembers how to develop the path (the fourth noble truth). The next poem comes to her later, but only in fragments (130-31). Both Vanessa, as she entraps herself by meandering somewhat purposelessly into Jules' room, and Jules, in her choice not to escape on the ferry with Vanessa, mirror the fragmentation and the incomplete comprehension of stress and suffering (the first noble truth) symbolized by the partial poem that initiated the sequence of events.

Before reading the second poem again—this time in full on the ferry (182-83)—Vanessa again practices appropriate attention in a way that mirrors her response to the first poem. She begins with the practice of meditation, but this time, the focus of the scene is where the practice leads—toward relinquishment. At the suggestion of her guide and the ship's captain, Vanessa abandons her possessions to the fuel container—the map

that has brought her this far, and even her name—as she symbolically abandons some of her craving (the second noble truth) and commits to the path of practice. The red lights of the ship are said to “burn like embers” (183) as the water and the night sky alight all around her. This image, as well as the description of Vanessa in meditation earlier in the scene, are purposely similar to the lantern metaphor for right concentration, which is discussed at the start of section V’s “Metaphor in Aśvaghōṣa’s *Handsome Nanda* and *The Unravelers*.” This ferry scene demonstrates how Vanessa, as a meditator, is able to refocus all her craving into the astonishing practice of right concentration. Appropriately at this moment, a path appears for her along the water.

Vanessa uses the poems to sequentially pull herself out of her fascination with the world—off of the lines, even the strings of words themselves—and she eventually emerges seeing clearly and is then able to help others to do the same. “[T]he rooms are open all around me,” she says after reading and relinquishing the last poem (184). Relatedly, the waters become more prevalent throughout Vanessa’s narrative, until during the final scene of the novel the world is nearly entirely covered by water. This highlights the warning throughout *The Unravelers* that the waters—like all of the elements—will inevitably reclaim everyone. The novel places readers within a Buddhist way of seeing the world, and calls for readers to ask Buddhist questions like: Will the characters die as fish too, or will they decide to untie themselves and get out of the tangle? Will they attend *appropriately* to the gravity of their situation?

Kai sees a poem the night he is temporarily blinded by an operation to fix his fading vision. This poem, from the Udāna, begins “Blinded by sensuality” (244)—which is also one of Kai’s defining characteristics—an appropriate poem for Kai since he has followed his sensual craving resulted in his return to Boulder in the first place. The poem compares those blinded by sensuality to fish in a trap. The poem appears immediately

after he asks Vanessa, “how do we get out? Where’s the path you are traveling?” (244). Therefore, Kai is able to see both the poem and the corresponding pull of sensuality due to the appropriate attention he demonstrates with this question. Although Kai recognizes the danger of his fixation on his lost love, Isabel, it is not until the end of the novel that he is able to cut these ties. At this moment, when he is finally able to let go of her, he sees the novel’s final canonical poem, which again instructs on how to view the world appropriately. An analysis of this poem is found in section IV “*Rasa*” under the sub-header “The Heroic and Astounding *Rasas*.”

Leo is the last of the three characters to engage the world through the lens of appropriate attention. Since Leo’s primary attachment is that of unchecked feeding—including addiction and sexual abuse—Leo’s narratives predominantly focus there. Vanessa addresses Leo through the potential story of his next life, *if* he decides to take the one she is suggesting. Again, the metaphor of the fish is featured as Vanessa explains to Leo the benefits that would come from removing himself from the feeding cycle and eventually cutting through the strings of his craving. She explains the hopelessness of his situation if he does not change course, saying, “Those not eaten will die in the tangle of the world, dragged about by haphazard hooks, baited with every shape of craving” (265).

At the end of the *The Unravelers*, the three characters mentioned above decide to follow the Buddhist path as they enter the next lifetime. They owe their success to their continued application of appropriate attention. Through these characters and their experiences, I seek to demonstrate how to effectively read a Buddhist text and then apply it to practice—not for the sake of depression, but to generate dispassion in order to find the path rooted in right concentration that leads out of craving and eventually, beyond any birth that would bring one back into the worlds of becoming.

A Buddhist novel can make contributions in the manner of the early Buddhist

*kāvya*s by inspiring the Buddha's teleological path of practice, mapped onto a poetics of reading which is congruent with the first steps of separating oneself from sensual craving: aligning one's acts of world-creation with the four noble truths, and relatedly, establishing oneself in right concentration (a discussion that will continue in section V). *The Unravelers*, like the early Buddhist *kāvya*s, presents the path as a multi-life endeavor, and although reading can be educational, enjoyable, and also orienting, it recognizes reading as only a taste of the path of practice. Ultimately, any proof of the results of Buddhist practice will be a personal and private experience—like reading—and is born of long-term dedication and practice. The first step in the reading practice is developing insight about what lens we are bringing to the reading experience—what experience we are already looking for before we open a book. As far as a Buddhist *kāvya* is concerned, suggesting a Buddhist way of attending to experience is enough of a starting point. The writer can point out the rewards of the path and its completion through the characters, and offer the reader a lens—a window through which to attend to their own experience in new terms—and perhaps even eventually, directing them to a lantern of right concentration of their own.

Exploring any aspect of the Buddhist path is worthwhile, but it should not surprise that a Buddhist novel can also utilize the more radical elements within the Buddhist teachings themselves: these novels can redefine the purpose of narrative, giving direction and an ultimate goal toward which we build our worlds. Although Buddhist narratives are ultimately nothing we can live in forever and will all have to be eventually let go, it is through them that we find direction on the path, and through enjoyment make strides in the work of completing it, refining our intentions and all acts of body, speech, and mind that grow from them, developing skillful karma to whatever degree we are able.

Depiction of *Rasa* in *The Unravelers*

In the prologue to *The Unravelers*: “The Flavor-Earth,” the astounding *rasa* is the first savor presented—the universe begins and the radiant gods come into being. As the dominant *rasa* of the novel, the astounding is also featured in the first chapter, narrated by Vanessa, as she continues to introduce the reader to the astounding *rasa*, while setting up the novel’s themes. The theory of how worlds can be tasted is introduced in the prologue as the gods themselves fall for the first flavor they come across—that of the flavor-earth they are standing on. The focus of this cosmic scene is not on awakening, as in the comparable realm of the final chapter of *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, which was discussed earlier. The focus in *The Unravelers* remains on how feeding itself produces a fall for the gods into lower births. The cosmic scene borrows aspects from *Digha Nikāya* 27 where the gods at beginning of time become fixated on feeding on the flavor-earth, which results in losing their luminosity and falling, taking birth in lower realms of sensuality, a *sutta* which Thānissaro Bhikkhu analyzes in *The Paradox of Becoming* (16-17).

The prologue of *The Unravelers* also juxtaposes this canonical vision with those rare gods that do *not* feed on the flavor-earth, but *remain* in the brahma realms at the edge of time. The group of gods that remain is referred to as “The Guild” throughout *The Unravelers*. The Guild are those who have achieved the level of awakening known as “non-returners”—the penultimate level of realization where even their craving to be reborn has been cut. The Guild is therefore still within space and time, although not for much longer. They will soon move on to full awakening. From their elevated perch, The Guild watches over creation and helps the characters, especially Vanessa, in the only way they will be heard—by indirectly dropping hints throughout the novel to help them find

the Buddhist path. The Guild is privy to a wealth of information about all realms of experience, and the process of moving between them.

Before Vanessa gains consciousness of the presence of The Guild in her worlds, in her first chapter, “Vanessa: Return,” she gathers flowers on her walk home—a return after death to a heavenly version of her childhood home. These flowers—the way they are described and especially their color—symbolize and anticipate all the major and minor *rasas* that make up the weave of the novel to come. Major *rasas* include: yellow daffodils symbolizing the astounding and orange reed grasses symbolizing the heroic. Minor *rasas* include: silver Japanese grass for the compassionate, purple-black tulips for the sensitive, red clematis for the furious, and blue bacopa for the horrific. As the novel continues, the colors reappear with regularity, but the flowers are often changed to match location and season. Vanessa herself is depicted at the start with blond hair and yellow flowers on her dress symbolic of the astounding. The astounding *rasa* is prevalent throughout the novel, but is especially present with Vanessa to highlight how her character best represents this *rasa*. She achieves elevated states of perception where she can see many realms, and more importantly, she is able to find the path that leads beyond all these worlds and then guide others to it. From the Buddhist point of view, Vanessa’s actions are the most consistently astounding of any protagonist in the novel.

When Vanessa receives a map from her guide, strings on the map are subtly associated with the novel’s characters and also with the color of the minor *rasa* initially most related to each of the other characters. This level of patterning is intended to help the reader distinguish between the protagonists while also identifying each protagonist’s tendency to fix on a particular type of experience. Vanessa narrates: “I see Leo as a red line, snaking in a spiral on the north shore of the Island. I see Jules, as the purple black diving into the Sound. I see Kairos as a silver line, moving through the city and ending

out West.” She asks her guide, “Do the people in the rooms get across? Do they leave the map or do they just come back to it?” (29). Although the character’s various struggles are implied through this imagery, the question of the possibility of leaving the map entirely is not resolved until the book’s conclusion.

The “strings,” the flavors of the various worlds, seem desirable at the start of the novel, but the allure of each minor *rasa* becomes more dangerous and unreliable as the novel continues. Similar to how the radiant gods fall by eating, indulging in the tastes of the various *rasas* for their own sake leads to the less desirable realms for each character—Leo falls into his passionate lust and drug use; Kai, into his obsession with his ex-fiancé; Jules, into her fixation on manic and depressive states; and Vanessa, into her desire to find revenge and also in her misguided attempt to save beings that have fallen. As a whole, the colored and named *rasas* above can also be equated with the strings of sensuality. There is no direct correlation between a certain colored string and an equivocal sense, but they all represent sensual craving at large. The strings of sensuality can be seen as the very walls of Vanessa’s black room—it is through the strings that she enters various worlds. If *rasa* is the general principle, strings, colors, and flowers are all visual representations of it operating in the novel.

The novel might be said to possess one additional string—the white string—except this string belongs in a different category since it is *not* correlated to the strings of sensuality. This additional *rasa* (if it can even be called that) has historically been referred to as the calmed. It is not one of the original eight *rasas*, but an analysis of its function will be explained later in this section (396). The white string is related to The Guild, the appearance at the conclusion of the lost city outside of space and time, and sometimes with the path to the lost city.

Even the title of the novel, *The Unravelers*, communicates the basic duality of the novel's imagery: characters are entrapped within worlds of string and screens and some get out of them and onto the Buddhist path—those who are able to unravel their craving. Not even The Guild provides comprehensive directions for the characters as to how unraveling can be achieved, but The Guild does provide a constant and reliable authority, that is, if the characters listen and can discern the message. Early in the narrative, The Guild presents Vanessa with a short guide with advice on topics such as “How to Find Openings in Seemingly Hopeless Configurations of Past and Present Karma” (47). The guide also issues a warning to Vanessa as she starts tasting and entering the worlds within the strings of her black room. The following warning is threaded into her black room, but Vanessa ignores it as her mind is colored by thoughts of revenge. She does not read The Guild's instructions, although the reader does—so we are able to root for Vanessa to eventually work toward dispassion as the message directs.

The Guild: A Warning

Before aiding other beings, would-be deva guides must first develop a firm grasp of the type of flavors they habitually fall for . . . The flavors of these experiences can be disorienting . . . we suggest you first visit

Module 62: Nibbidā: Developing Distaste for the Variety of Worlds. But you won't—at least, probably not at first suggestion. As much as this refusal to visit **Module 62** depresses us, it really is your choice. (62-63)

The reader is invited to step back from Vanessa's craving through The Guild's warning and therefore contrasts Vanessa's inability to pull back from her desire for revenge in the section that follows. The Guild supports the characters in their efforts to grow dispassionate with the tastes of their worlds and direct them toward the path out of birth and death as the narrative does for the reader with the use of intra-textual elements like

the guide and poems from the *Pāli* Canon. Ultimately, as The Guild says above, the decision to develop dispassion is one the characters and readers have to make for themselves.

Vanessa follows The Guild's instructions (eventually) and develops distaste and gets on the path, but Jules does not—she has no desire to. *Rasa* theory is used in *The Unravelers* much in the style of instruction attributed to The Guild. The reader is much like the book's characters: the flavors are there, but how they are experienced depends both on how the reader applies the novel's suggestions, and what the individual reader wants or expects from the text. The reader can be instructed somewhat, through the text itself, about how to read a Buddhist *kāvya*, but as the Buddha himself mentions in *Majjhima Nikāya* 107: it is possible to give two people the same instructions to a city and one person might make it to the destination according to instructions while a second might “take a wrong road”—a road that does not lead to awakening. In his book *Skill in Questions*, Thānissaro Bhikkhu translates this *sutta* and explains that the Buddha taught a path that is categorically true, and works for everyone that follows it (88-89). *The Unravelers*, and the figures of The Guild within it, encourage developing distaste and dispassion, but it is up to the readers to decide how far they wish to follow that thread.

The Heroic and Astounding *Rasas* in the Early Buddhist *Kāvya*s and *The Unravelers*

Rasa has been used as end in and of itself—simply to produce an enjoyable work of art—but historic Buddhist writers have taken it a step further, applying *rasa* to also inspire motivation on the Buddhist path and to educate those interested in Buddhist practices. *Kāvya* was not Buddhist in origin and was only occasionally utilized for religious purposes. However, the earliest examples extant today are from the Buddhist *Pāli* Canon, in a Prakrit dialect “very close to the old [original] Magdhi and strongly influenced by it”

(Warder, vol. I 4). The objective of the art according to the *Nāṭyaśāstra* was to “display evil actions and intentions and their results” (Warder, vol. I 19) thereby providing a container within which the early Buddhist understanding of karma fit easily (a container Buddhism likely influenced). *Rasa* is an elaborately designed method of creating the desired emotional effect on an audience through the principle of karma by depicting the development of those mental qualities consistent with the Buddhist path. In the case of *The Unravelers*, *rasa* theory was further adapted to fit current contexts and sensibilities.

In his introduction to the first volume of *Indian Kāvya Literature*, A.K. Warder offers *kāvya* as a form we might “add to our common inheritance” (xv), and expresses his appreciation of all the ancient *kāvis*, offering his study on them in order to help us, the reader, to increase our “sensitivity, our compassion, our sense of the comic and the marvellous and perhaps even our ‘heroism’” (xiv). Early Buddhist *kāvyas* accomplished many of these aims.

Early Buddhist *kāvya* examples are found throughout the *Pāli* Canon, but most notably in the *Udāna*, a hybrid text of prose and poetry, which artfully presents such challenging topics as going beyond becoming, as well as the *Dhammapada*, a poetry collection of some of the most famous teachings of the Buddha, which instructs on the results of both wise and heedless action. These two collections demonstrate how the astounding and the heroic *rasas* (respectively) are used to extol the virtues and transcendent ends of dispassion and release of the Buddhist tradition.

Of the original eight *rasas* discussed in the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, the heroic and astounding are the most congruent with the Buddhist path. Regardless of which *rasa* is considered most prominent in a Buddhist work, the other is generally found present as well, in a subordinate role. For example, when the astounding is applied in a subordinate role and the heroic is primary, such as in the *Dhammapada*, the astounding acts as a

conditioning agent, engendering the appropriate and amazed response to heroic acts, in this case the development of mental qualities that lead to awakening (Patnaik 235).

The *Dhammapada* ends and the *Udāna* begins by redefining what it means to be a “true Brahman.” Both texts assert that true nobility is not something earned by caste of birth but through actions (karma). The *Dhammapada* identifies the differences between the type of actions that a wise person and a fool engages in. In his introduction to the *Dhammapada*, Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu explains that the first three chapters of the poetic text outline how the wise are “heedful enough to make the necessary effort to train his/her own mind to be a skillful architect; and [the fool] is heedless and sees no reason to train the mind” (iv). Both the *Dhammapada* and the *Udāna* detail the stages of training and end with rewards of the mind being either unfettered (*Udāna*) or going beyond path and paradox (*Dhammapada*). The result of the texts, that is, the karma of reading them, is that the path seems attractive (iv).

Integral to the theory of these master Buddhist *kāvyas* is a faith in the Buddhist goal of awakening. Since these Buddhist texts claim a single path out of causality, and the suffering and stress inherent in it, and present a goal that is universally outside of even the restrictions of space and time, then it follows that these Buddhist narratives are concerned primarily with that goal and of cultivating the path that ends craving in order to reach this transcendent goal. The path includes training the mind in order to make oneself into “a competent judge” of the text’s message—in other words, to put the path into practice skillfully enough to experience the result of completing it (Ṭhānissaro, *Udāna* 22).

Dhamma rasa is one of three varieties of the heroic *rasa* (Ṭhānissaro, *Dhammapada* 98, 157). *Dhammapada* verse 354 claims that “the taste of Dhamma [concurs] all tastes”—in other words, that the *Dhamma rasa* is the highest. *Dhamma rasa*

depicts energy, which is produced by “exhortations to action, strong verbs, repeated imperatives, and frequent use of the imagery from battles, races, and conquests” (v). As Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu’s commentary on *Dhammapada* verse 354 concludes, “the highest expression of the heroic *Dhamma rasa* is the ending of craving” (157), a topic which is featured throughout *The Unravelers*. Traditionally, any version of the heroic moves toward the astounding as the work nears completion (vi).

The *Pāli* Canon teaches that there are various levels of happiness to be found in many stations in life—in many worlds. The *Dhammapada* and the *Udāna* offer a typical *kāvya* subplot of a person reaching worldly happiness by helping a *Dhamma* hero (ix, x). This demonstrates that even those not striving for release from suffering can still benefit from developing skillful mental qualities and/or by reaping the benefits that come through the practice of generosity.

The Unravelers does not attempt to supply the same level of detail and precision regarding the practice of the Buddhist path as the *kāvyas* of the *Pāli* Canon, but as previously discussed, it does explore the motivation to start, for both character and reader. The narrative of *The Unravelers* closes with three characters all seeking a transcendent liberation, but these are not the only intentions congruent with the Buddhist path. As the characters in *The Unravelers* make their way toward more desirable ends, it is in large part thanks to their participation within the culture of generosity—a virtue that is not transcendent in and of itself, but even when practiced without concentration can lead to worldly happiness.

Heroic acts in *The Unravelers* (in this case when characters take the implications of karma seriously and act on them) are what allows for the astounding *rasa* (Patnaik 59). Vanessa’s decision to confront her rapist and then to help guide him is one example. Vanessa is tasked with perhaps the most challenging job—helping her rapist, Leo, out of

hell. She is understandably hesitant and begins the work with mixed intentions—at first, she enjoys watching him burn, still trapped in her desire for revenge. As she waits for him to emerge from hell, she gains a rudimentary insight into karma and the benefits of generosity. “Who would ever have thought I would be your angel,” Vanessa says. “Maybe my new world is not the worst case scenario after all. The fire is regrettable, really, but I guess it’s true what they say, Leo: you reap what you sow” (62).

Thanks to Vanessa’s subsequent help, Leo avoids a return to hell by agreeing to help direct wayward souls in the subway. Here he comes to understand that if he is going to bring himself to safety, he must give the kind of help to others that he needs himself.

Leo narrates:

My job is to get off these lines—to help myself and maybe others to find the open doors. Listen, a better option is always right there, a doorway we’re not seeing. I guess I fell through enough of the wrong ones to know. Maybe I’m here to make a positive out of a lot I did wrong. When you gotta fall from the train, you gotta fall—but even then you got choices.
(209)

These are many depictions of heroic acts of positive karma between the characters where all benefit, and astounding karmic consequences are produced as a result towards the end of the novel. In addition to these moral heroic acts there are also key instances of Buddhist heroism in the novel that lead to opportunities to take a more fruitful rebirth: Kairos’ decision to leave behind his sensual fixation, and Leo’s decisions to take both a short and painful human birth and then another one as a monk. Each of these heroic acts actualize heroic intentions; all are turning points in the novel.

The *Udāna* reverses the pattern of the *Dhammapada*, and inspires the reader by taking the astounding *rasa* as primary and augments it with heroic acts consistent with

the heroic *rasa*. Patnaik explains two sides to the astounding, writing that this *rasa* “indicates that which surprises in a delightful manner” while also allowing the perception of the frightening side of the supernatural (Patnaik 59). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* summarizes the astounding as “any speech that contains an unusual idea . . . or any remarkable act” (qtd. in Patnaik 207). The *Udāna: Exclamations*, presents many amazing and astounding events in the teaching career of the Buddha and in the development of his followers, from psychic powers to the development of skillful qualities of mind. The *Udāna* depicts not only instances where awakening is attained, but also contrasts these stories with the Buddha’s observation of amazing instances of heedlessness and wrong view (Ṭhānissaro, *Udāna* 9-11).

According to Patnaik, the astounding involves the presentation of “doing things in a remarkable way” (206). A character with a well-developed skill is often depicted, and when the reader does not possess it, a certain awe is created and a greater “distancing” occurs than it does in other *rasas*. Since the reader likely does not have the same skill as Vanessa in entering various worlds, the distance between reader and character is especially pronounced. *The Unravelers*’ presentation of becoming as a whole can be considered the astounding *rasa* since it depicts experience outside of that of the ordinary individual. The astounding can be accomplished with a physical skill, the presentation of refined mental qualities, or even through admiration for the writer’s skill (Patnaik 207). The *Nāṭyaśāstra* also reports that the astounding can result from inspiring sights such as “seeing heavenly beings [or] going to a temple” (qtd. in Patnaik 205).

Similarly, in *The Unravelers*, the astounding is elicited when Vanessa experiences visionary moments in the field of seeds, the dead taking birth from train windows as it spirals above New York City, and when a path made of phytoplankton appears behind her ferry and all the rooms of the cosmos open around her. The astounding is also present

when Leo receives paper versions of his own hell-realm designs—which he authored and then lived in without seeing the connection between the two. Leo also gains, and later loses, a crack-pipe mouth, and is burned alive but doesn't die. Jules is born underwater without the need to breathe, and enters worlds through lobster traps. These scenes provide a sense of wonder, consistent with the astounding.

Vanessa and Kai also demonstrate the other side of the astounding: hesitation, even fear when faced with endless rounds of birth and death. When Vanessa is searching for a stable world within the vast field of seeds she hears a voice that sums up her predicament, saying, “Here is your astounding moment, the horrible moment of the field. The instant you know, ‘It’s like this,’ is the instant it becomes other than that” (48). Vanessa is forced to look for answer’s elsewhere, as an eternally stable world within one of the seeds, does not exist. Kai too experiences the dark side of the astounding *rasa*—fear and hesitation—when invited to experience the technological marvels of the virtual world of Contact. Contact is an embodiment of the World of the Devas Who Delight in Creation—a realm just above the human where technology is just slightly beyond that on earth. This class of devas are mentioned in the *Pāli* Canon, but are not described in detail. Kai is losing his sight and cannot yet enter rooms like Vanessa does in her black room. He could gain back his vision by signing a contract with Contact, and even gain vision of other times and places in the process. But Kai, mirroring the teleological focus of the novel itself, is concerned about where this contract will take him. Kai struggles to accept Contact’s fabricated happiness, but as the doctors point out: he is already fabricating his world through his thoughts, words, and perceptions. Contact encourages Kai to live in the world they have prepared for him, since his immediate pleasure will be greater there.

Dr. Dean explains that everyone must be “chipped” in order to see in this realm. He advises Kai during an appointment at Contact:

“think of it as a tool you might use to add some flavor for now . . . Expect your life to become better gradually. And then you can make your choice, jump into a body . . . or come back to us for the latest update . . .”

“No offense,” I say, “but it sounds like you haven’t totally figured this out.”

“Of course not!” he tells me, “we’re not gods. We’re geeks.

But—” his dramatic pause tells me he’s worked on this line before—“in a world where first sight is fading, the geeks are closer to gods than ever.”

(236)

Kai’s reluctance to fix on the pleasures of the deva world’s new technology system around him keeps the truly astounding element of the novel that of Buddhist practice: the power to train human action to achieve transcendent results without the need for software updates or new, fancier electronic devices. In offering Kai the latest “flavor,” Dr. Dean is also offering the entrapment and delusion that comes along with it. Kai’s skepticism throughout these scenes mirrors that of the practiced meditator who is trained to look for the allure (flavor) *in conjunction* with the drawbacks, so the next world is entered with discernment and only when the payoff is actually worth it. The final scene, where Jules chooses to be born back into her world of lobster traps is also an example of the astounding ability of human beings to choose suffering simply because they lack imagination that there could be other possibilities. Jules ends the novel with her disheartening and astoundingly unwise last line of: “What else would we do? . . . What other choices would we have?” (286).

Of the two *Pāli* Buddhist *kāvya*s, the *Udāna*’s use of *rasa*—where the astounding *rasa* is primary and the heroic *rasa* is subordinate—is closer to *The Unravelers* than the inverted use of *rasa* in the *Dhammapada*. Both *The Unravelers* and the *Udāna* also focus

on another astounding topic: the complex nature of karma. In a depiction of the process of becoming, *The Unravelers* shows characters creating their own frameworks of meaning, one after the next, forgetting how or why they set them into motion, creating rooms that the respective character then has to live inside until his or her karma expires or he or she discerns an exit. The exit most frequently comes through the factor of appropriate attention to stress—the character makes a change to the way he or she approaches the world through the lens of the four noble truths. The escape from a world is also sometimes discerned through the words of another who comes to help the character, but even then, it is actually the character's ability to adjust his or her perception, or to apply the helper's advice, that makes the difference.

Although heroic aspects of the path are touched upon, *The Unravelers*, like the *Udāna*, chooses instead to focus primarily on the astounding nature of the path and those who practice it. This choice allows for *The Unravelers* to be a novel first, that also happens to be Buddhist, rather than a collection of Buddhist teachings set in the format of a novel. Since I consider myself a novelist, not a Buddhist teacher, the astounding *rasa* is an especially appropriate choice.

The *Udāna* mentions dependent co-arising (the Buddhist system of causality which includes the strings of sensuality) but does not explain the individual factors as thoroughly as other parts of the *Pāli* Canon (Ṭhānissaro, *Udāna* 13). For example, in Majjhima Nikāya 9, Ven. Sāriputta clarifies that fully comprehending the relationship between any two adjacent factors in dependent co-arising results in an experience of awakening. In other words, it is not necessary to understand dependent co-arising in its entirety. The chain can be cut between any two factors (Ṭhānissaro, *Handful of Leaves Vol. Two* 30-44).

As mentioned previously, *The Unravelers* focuses especially on the relationship between the two factors of fabrication and becoming (which, within dependent co-arising, lead to the next adjacent factor of birth). The analogy of feeding on the soil of past karma is one example. When Kai says to his doctor, “At least I can grow your own food out there . . . I can meditate,” he is referring to the use of fabrication and becoming on the Buddhist path through concentration practice. Manipulating his breath is fabrication, and the state that he builds out of it is a world of becoming. The doctor replies with a warning. “Yes,” he says, “you feed on whatever comes out of the soil. The problem is, there are impurities in your soil” (212). All characters have “impurities,” in that they are ignorant of the causes of stress and suffering. Ironically in this instance, the corporation of Contact is also ignorant. Contact is deluded in their belief that they can produce an eternal and stable world of pleasure for all their clients. The happiness promised by developing dispassion and the rest of the Buddhist path, on the other hand, promises to provide a happiness that is uncaused and beyond all worlds.

Relatedly, *The Unravelers* also presents dependent co-arising by focusing on the sub-factor of the strings of sensuality. On a macro scale, the uncomprehended causes of suffering symbolized by the strings in *The Unravelers* appear as they do in *Digha Nikāya* 15 as a “tangled skein, a knotted ball of string” (*Handful of Leaves* 170). On the micro scale, *The Unravelers* often follows the string of a single intention. As Vanessa explores her black room, she explores the macro, discovering that she has a different relationship to each color within the knotted string of suffering all around her:

up close, I see a weave of colored string, each with tangles, knotted into like-colored seedpods. With both hands, I crack the threads of a red pod, smaller than a fingernail, and Leo looks up at me inside of it, his eyes dilated and red . . . “Get out of my room,” I whisper through clenched

teeth. My fingers burn against the thread and they let go, the image fading with the colors into the blackness of the lattice . . . I open the purple-black pod and there is Jules floating in the sea, her flesh bloated. She ducks away before I can call for her, pressing red lotus flowers to her chest. “Jules!” I call. “Jesus, what did you do?” but the fine purple-black thread slips from my fingers and closes behind her like seaweed. (16-17)

As for a micro view of the strings of sensuality, one example is when Kairos narrates from inside a world of a childhood memory when he is drifting out to sea on a tire tube. Here he describes the experience of being inside the tangles of sensuality as haphazard and random—a description that is especially true for one with an untrained mind.

I close my eyes despite the nausea and lose all sense of direction. I imagine the gods watching us from above—or am I asking them to?

We are a silver cursive line trolling among the waves, perhaps spelling something in some secret language. My thoughts are overcome by water, the lapping waves erasing me. One phrase. One letter at a time. I could be anyone. (42)

The novel uses these astounding images to provide motivation for the reader to escape from stress and suffering. However, *The Unravelers* does not provide lists of factors within dependent co-arising, as they could be bewildering for the reader and overly didactic in this context. Most importantly, the novel does extensively explore (through a focus on fabrication and becoming) the degree to which characters are responsible for creating their worlds. The fact that present intention comes *before* they step into a world demonstrates over and over in the work that no one is as tied to their craving as they might think—characters get to choose, which presents the possibility of escape as always present.

One potential foil to the possibility of Kai's escape appears near the end of the book when he receives instruction from his unreliable doctors as they teach him to manipulate the screens before him. Within these scenes, *The Unravelers* mentions an additional relationship within the factors of dependent co-arising. The name of the company, "Contact," is a factor within dependent co-arising that brings the factor of consciousness together with that of the six sense media. This scene within Contact, and many others throughout the novel, depict screens that relate directly to the function of perception—an essential factor in the way worlds are created (becoming) and manipulated (fabricated). In this instance, Contact is especially explicit in their instructions:

we encourage you to explore the level of fabrication recommended by your doctor, Dr. Dean, and familiarize yourself with the range of perceptions available. We suggest that you use this time to fine-tune your interface. Contact works with your body's original chemistry to enhance optimized homeostasis. If you experience feelings of boredom, fatigue, doubt, loneliness, general displeasure, feelings of agitation, confusion, anger, ill will, or worry, simply return to the elements—to the felt sense of the body.

If you find the resulting perception disturbing, you may change it.

Adjustments are a necessary part of orientation. (242)

The danger of the corporation of Contact is that they are offering to eventually *take away* the choices of their clients. In return for a pleasant life, the company dulls their client's ability to train the underlying intentions of their minds. From the Buddhist perspective, Kai is correct in his challenge of his doctors. The trade Contact offers him is a short-term fix, a trap that will only take away his freedom and lead to his ruin in the long run.

Contact's worlds seem good on the surface, but the type of happiness they are offering him—like any deva realm—has an expiration date, and offers no safety net for him when he falls from that realm.

All of the above instances educate the reader to some extent, but the focus remains on the astounding effect that comprehending even rudimentary principles within dependent co-arising has on the character. What is more amazing than Kai's visit to Contact—where he not only regains his sight, but can also experience the past with clarity through the screens—is his choice to break from the corporation in his final scene along the Great Divide. Vanessa helps Kai considerably in this scene, but it is worth remembering that in order to get to the Divide, Kai had to do a lot of work on his own, and even when Vanessa helps him here, the choices are still his own to make. Vanessa says,

“This is just another place . . . But if you're ready to choose, it's the *right* place. I can show you the options.”

“Another contract?” I ask.

“Every *body* comes with a contract,” she says. “But you can help write it. Which threads from your past can we weave with? Which ones can we work around for now?” (277)

Kai's psychological break from his entanglement with Contact has a visual counterpart for the reader—he removes the string around his wrist that one of the Contact doctors tied on for him. What unfurls subsequently is a poem that makes conscious allusion to the teachings of the *Pāli* canon, as the trajectories of character and reader are brought into alignment. This poem is a hybrid—the shortened and rearranged stanza, below, is based on *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 22:95 (248). In the novel, it is followed by a second stanza of original work.

the body lies thrown away
 senseless
 a meal for others
 that's the way it goes:
 form is like a glob of foam
 feeling, a bubble
 perception, a mirage
 fabrications, a banana tree
 consciousness, a magic trick—
 an idiot's babbling.
 it's said to be
 a murderer (281)

The poems used in the novel are all intended to elicit a sense of dispassion for the entanglements of the world, for the strings of sensuality that keep one bound within dependent co-arising. The poetry throughout *The Unravelers* adds not only a consistent dispassionate voice, but a level precision in its language that cuts through delusion, mirroring linguistically the way that the character's awareness is heightened in the moment when he or she witnesses the poetry. The poetry in the novel can also be seen as a meta-narrative in that it all disappears as the Buddhist teachings too inevitably will. An early version of one of the fish poems vanishes as Vanessa reads it (130-31), and even the later and complete version of the poem is given away as fuel for the ferry along with the rest of the poems on Vanessa's map. Similarly, the poem above, which appears at the very end of the novel, vanishes into the path. The disappearance of the poetry demonstrates that the words of *Pāli* Canon, above all else, are to be put to use in the practice. The disappearance of the poetry serves as further commentary on two levels.

Firstly, the words of the teachings, like the path itself, are something that eventually has to be put aside once the path is fully developed and the practitioner is able to step into awakening—depicted in the *Pāli* Canon and *The Unravelers* as the lost city at the end of the path. Secondly, the Buddha predicted the inevitability that his teachings would be changed over time until the path would be completely lost. This *sutta* is often cited to help spur practitioners on to practice diligently right now, while there are still enough of the Buddha’s teachings available, and to also help preserve the teachings for as long as possible.

When Kai steps onto the path, after the scene at the Great Divide, this is the culmination of many skillful intentions that he has made, demonstrating the remarkable power and results that come from taking the karma of present intention seriously and training oneself in accord with it. The ending montage of *The Unravelers* elicits the astounding *rasa* by depicting the remarkable acts of not just Kai, but also of Vanessa, and Leo as they put the Buddhist teachings into practice. The montage is also balanced by Jules’ remarkable heedlessness. The astounding is also present in the novel’s closing through the structure—the montage weaves together all four protagonists and many of the images used throughout the novel, bringing most of the major and minor *rasas* together to support a final taste of the astounding.

The Calmed Rasa

In a traditional Indian *kāvya*, the training of the emotions was aimed at one of the four ends in life: “pleasure, or wealth and power, or moral ends . . . or renunciation” (Warder, vol. I xiv). The early Buddhist *kāvyas* primarily pointed the reader toward the end of renunciation, an end that not only required the energy and inspiration (experienced

through the heroic and astounding *rasas*), but also depicted the calming of restless mind states, and the release from stress at awakening.

Although reference to a calmed *rasa* did not come until much later, the calming *aspects* of the early Buddhist *kāvya*s are undeniable. Linda Covill, translator of Aśvaghoṣa's *Handsome Nanda* (2007), cites in her other book, *A Metaphorical Study of Saundarananda* (2009), Udbhaṭa (8th century) as the originator of a ninth *rasa*, the calmed, whereas Warder notes Buddhist dramatists Rāhula as probably the “real first formulator” but only references to his work remain (Warder, vol. I 40). Many theorists, connected to various Indian religions, debated whether the calmed *rasa* should be considered the “ninth *rasa*” (Warder, vol. I 39-40), a debate that highlights an important difference between the early Buddhist concept of awakening to that of other sects.

The calmed, or even stasis, which many postulated it implies, is an idea many other theorists saw as categorically different from *rasa*—as taste in absence or the experience of detaching oneself from any particular passion or flavor. Even though the calmed experience may be different in that it stills rather than stirs emotional response, many theorists still found a basis for its inclusion. The calmed embodied an aspect that united all other *rasas* in that they are already “heightened aesthetic states,” and as such they are all a type of stasis characterized by the detachment of the reader (Patnaik 64).

Abhinavagupta (10th century CE) followed this logic further and claimed the calmed is actually the principal *rasa* and the one that all other *rasas* were aimed at (Warder, vol. I 45). As support for his position, he offers a version of the *Nāṭyaśāstra*, a manuscript that Warder notes contains a “late interpolation” (vol. I, 40), that references the calmed. Abhinavagupta's text calls the calmed (or *śānta rasa*): “one's natural state of mind” and explains the other emotions as a deformation of *śānta* that “arise out of *śānta* depending on their particular respective causes. And when the specific causes cease to

function, they all merge back into *śānta*.” (*Śānta Rasa*, p. 93 qtd. in Patnaik 65-66).

Abhinavagupta clarifies the relationship of *śānta* to the other *rasas* as “a very white thread that shines through the interstices of sparsely threaded jewels. It assumes the forms of all the various feelings like love etc, (which are imposed on it)” (*Śānta Rasa* p. 142 qtd. in Patnaik 68). Thus, Abhinavagupta’s transcendent *śānta rasa* stands apart from emotion, and is colored only by the reflection of others emotions.

The difference in Abhinavagupta’s formulation of the calmed and the Buddhist *use* of calm in their early *kāvyas* is in Abhinavagupta’s aims: Abhinavagupta regarded the calmed reading experience as a transcendent end in itself. Similarly, Patnaik’s application of stilling sensual desire in the calmed cites the Upanishads and equates the calmed with unity with Brahma or even the embrace of one’s wife (225-26). Neither is a goal consistent with early Buddhist practice, where in *Majjhima Nikāya* 105 (and many other places throughout the Canon), indulging in thoughts of sensual pleasure are the very definition of wrong concentration (441-47) and any claim of unity with the cosmos are to be regarded as a particularly foolish self-identity view (as in the previously mentioned *Majjhima Nikāya* 22). Both of these goals develop an element of passion—the passion for some type of unity—contrasting to the Buddhist development of dispassion.

The *Dhammapada* and the *Udāna*, along with Aśvaghoṣa’s two post-canonical *kāvyas* (the early Buddhist *kāvyas*) are more concerned with the role that calm plays on *the path* to a transcendent end. They depict the calming of sensual aims and the restless mind states that arise dependent on such aims. Warder writes, “Of the ‘aesthetic experience’ in the Tripitaka [which includes the *Udāna* and *Dhammapada*] one can almost always say it is the calmed, but touches of the heroic, sensitive, comic, compassionate, marvelous, etc., will also be found” (Warder, vol. II 28). The *Udāna* and the *Dhammapada*, already having been discussed as classic examples of the more

energizing *rasas* of the astounding and the heroic respectively, also have their calming attributes. There is no contradiction since calm and energy are not mutually exclusive. In fact, it is only in the precise relationship of calm and energy that the Buddhist path can cohere and develop. That both experiences of *rasa* are central in all the early Buddhist *kāvya*s is not surprising.

The Depiction of Right Resolve in Aśvaghoṣa and *The Unravelers*

The balance and integration of the factors of calm and energy, are evident in all seven sets of mental qualities, the wings to awakening, that the Buddha used to set out his teachings found within the *Pāli* Canon (the most widely discussed set from the “wings” being the noble eightfold path). One of the seven sets, the “seven factors for awakening,” focuses most explicitly on the use of calm and energy. In his compilation of *suttas* from the *Pāli* Canon, *Wings to Awakening* (1996), Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu explains how the seven factors hone the development of right concentration through balancing calming factors (serenity, concentration, & equanimity) and energetic ones (analysis of qualities, persistence & rapture) (165-70). Just as *rasa* is a type of food for the reader, right concentration is food, a skillful pleasure that is central the path, to be enjoyed by the meditator.

But before the early Buddhist *kāvya*s depict the development of right concentration, the narratives often focus first on the development of an aspirant’s right resolve: they learn to avoid the extremes of sensual desire and self-affliction and seek happiness through other more fruitful means. These reflections help calm the would-be meditator, opening the door for the deeper practice of concentration, just like the depiction of right resolve helps calm the reader in *The Unravelers*.

The first-century poet-monk Aśvaghoṣa provides the strongest models of Buddhist *kāvya* outside of the *Pāli* Canon. He uses the *Pāli* texts and more elaborate *kāvya* styling to depict compelling characters and well-composed arguments that make the middle way of right resolve clear and desirable. Aśvaghoṣa's most famous work, *Life of the Buddha*, is a detailed and lavishly embroidered account of the Buddha's life as described in the *Pāli* Canon. *Life of the Buddha* emphasizes the heroic *rasa* and like the *Dhammapada*, clarifies the Buddhist path in detail within a narrative verse form. In translator Patrick Olivelle's introduction, he writes that the "most prominent front of this battle centers on the interpretation of dharma" with the Buddha's version emerging superior to the Vedic versions that predated it (Olivelle xlix).

In Aśvaghoṣa's narrative, a seer, soon after his birth, predicted that Siddhartha would become a forest renunciate and achieve the highest bliss, a story that also resides in the *Pāli* Canon's *Sutta Nipāta* 3:11. His father, the king, therefore constructs the "ideal" palace life, so that his son will never leave, seeking to prevent this renunciation. Siddhartha lives his early years in "the top floors of the palace . . . like divine mansions erected on earth," (Aśvaghoṣa, *Life of Buddha* 47) where women played music for him, or danced like *apsarases*—the heavenly dove-footed nymphs that appear more centrally in Aśvaghoṣa's other narrative, *Handsome Nanda* (discussed below) (47). The future Buddha is depicted as complete in all forms of sensual pleasure, his entertainments including even those "skilled in erotic arts" and "tireless" at that (49). Still, he eventually finds these pleasures wanting. In *The Unravelers*, Kai engages in several parallel reflections in the later Colorado part of the narrative, reflecting on the drawbacks of rebuilding a world around the perfect relationship (191-92) or around the pleasures promised by Contact's virtual worlds (231).

In Aśvaghoṣa's *Life of Buddha*, when Siddhartha hears of nature, he is impelled to go see it for himself. But what he sees on his first journeys outside the palace sets his search for awakening into motion—just as the characters in *The Unravelers* gain an awareness of their self-constructed prisons and seek a way out. For the first time, Siddhartha sees old age, the destroyer of beauty, and cannot believe that with knowledge of this pending condition, “people do not become distraught” (75). He sees sickness and exclaims at the ignorance of humankind: “although they are tormented by pain, people continue to enjoy themselves . . . [and] to laugh” (77). At this his mind “is repelled by pleasures” (79). Finally, Siddhartha encounters death and learns that it awaits everyone. *The Unravelers* reverses the sequence, introducing death first, to focus on the issue of becoming across many types of births rather than the development of one extraordinary individual as in *Life of Buddha*. When Siddhartha confronts death, he exclaims, “yet the world rashly revels [is intoxicated/heedless], casting fears aside; The hearts of men must indeed be hard, that they journey along this road so unperturbed.” It is only upon meeting a forest renunciate who reports that within him “love and hate of sensual things have been extinguished,” (133) that Siddhartha is inspired to leave home in search of a deathless happiness. This is perhaps the most famous sequence of disillusionment depicted in any Buddhist *kāvya*, although many exist. These reflections take different angles in an effort to help pry the reader's mind away from fixation on sensual pleasures.

In the Colorado portion of *The Unravelers*, Kai longs to return to a life in the desert, to practice meditation, but also realizes that these solo efforts have not been successful in the past. He reflects while waiting for the second doctor at Contact: “But even out alone in the desert, I had to come back—and even then, my meditation was full of holes. There's got to be somebody who knows a way out. Could I find the monks in the forest? Were they still there?” (231). It is not until the end at the Great Divide, that

Kai connects his practice back to his initial inspiration—meeting the visiting forest monks in New York City—as Vanessa offers him a rebirth where he can go practice with them. This is a conscious reference to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, which of all the Buddhist religions is most closely connected to the teachings of the historic Buddha, including the early Buddhist *kāvyas* of the *Pāli* Canon. More specifically, the word “forest” references the Thai Forest Tradition, the branch of Theravāda which is rooted in testing the Buddha’s teachings through wilderness meditation, and also, as previously mentioned, the branch I have spent the most time in dialogue with.

In *Life of the Buddha*, the subordinate *rasa* of the horrific—achieved through the depiction of disgust—is one tool that helps perform this function along with the subordinate *rasa* of love in separation, which is discussed later. According to Patnaik, for disgust to lead to calm we need, “an alternative metaphysical system” that contemporary literature does not provide (Patnaik 186). But as Aśvaghoṣa’s Indian Buddhist narrative demonstrates, disgust leading to calm functions effectively within the Buddhist system and should be as adoptable in North America and Europe once narratives that present renunciation in a desirable light emerge. One way disgust can lead to calm is when a character reconsiders his or her past unbecoming behavior in order to behave differently in the future. In Colorado, Kai reflects on the disgust he has for the historic treatment of the Native Americans by his people. He does not consider himself separate from such atrocities, but instead connects such harm back to his own craving (i.e. thirst)—the cause of harm, which he too continues to carry within him.

The troops surrounded the Indians along the creek banks and shot them, hunted them down among the bushes, sliced the fetuses out of the woman.

People in Boulder will still tell you, that Niwot cursed the whites to forever return to the valley—no matter how many times they leave, or

how hard they try to stay away—but that’s pure fabrication. Niwot never cursed anyone. We’ve cursed ourselves to come back here. We’ve cursed ourselves with our thirst. I’m guilty too, but that’s what I do: I wander where my thirst pulls me. (188)

Disgust can also lead to calm if an object of lust is properly contemplated using the requisite parts of the body, trading sensual attachment for the calm and stability of the Buddhist path—albeit sometimes only momentarily.

Patnaik cites one such example in Aśvaghoṣa’s scene of the spell-bound and sleeping maidens (Patnaik 230, 234). Siddhartha has decided to leave for life as a forest renunciate, but his father forbids it sending him back to the heavenly upper levels of the palace. Siddhartha’s resolve is so strong that deities come to his aid by putting the maidens into a sleep (Aśvaghoṣa, *Life of Buddha* 141-45). At first, there are several charming and at times sexual depictions of the sleeping maidens: one’s flute “embraced . . . as if it were her girlfriend,” another’s drum:

. . . between her thighs—
the drum’s beautiful cord
slipping from her shoulder—
like a lover lying exhausted
after making passionate love (147, 149)

Siddhartha, in his vow to break from sensual aims, focuses on their less than charming attributes. They are next described, “like a statue of a girl/trampled by an elephant,” or “snoring with their mouths agape/without any shame and out of control,” or worse, “lying as if dead,” or

. . . as if she was drunk
mouth wide open and saliva oozing,

legs wide open and genitals exposed,
body distorted, looking repulsive. (151)

The bodhisattva then reflects that if men thought about what sleep alone does to a woman's elegance, "their passion for them would not wax" (151) and with that the gods open the door, and Siddhartha is finally permitted to slip out of the palace and into the life of a renunciate. Āśvaghoṣa applies disgust in a strategic way, depicting Siddhartha's development of right resolve in a single scene. Siddhartha is so convinced that the world of passions are a dead end, that he flees the palace to pursue the training of mental qualities, potentials that eventually lead to his full release from suffering and stress.

The Unravelers also shapes the reader's experience of the sensual in a similar way, by presenting some of the insidious sides to lust—a scene in college where Leo date rapes Vanessa, and a later scene in the post-human life realms where Vanessa takes her revenge by consuming Leo through the sex act on a train.

He feels his form go out, come back in for an instant, and then in a rush disperse into every direction, his skin-bag body deflating. The bed is a marsh. What remains of his density leaks out his pores in a clear substance, into the mattress. In the center of the bed her thighs straddle a stretch of melting skin putty. She breathes in deeply and releases a sigh suggestive of bees, her skin pulsing with new life. She slides herself to one side, and casually pulls at the shape by one of its limp latex extremities, the shriveled skin of a hand, and rolls the form off the loft. It hits the floor like a wave of water, disappearing into the narrow grate on the floor. (95)

The use of disgust demonstrates the unattractive side of the same craving which is also necessary for romantic love.

The Calm of Renunciation in *The Unravelers*

To balance the inspiration and energy of the astounding *rasa* and main subordinate *rasa* of the heroic, *The Unravelers* depicts the calm caused by dispassion toward worldly aims. Wealth or power are potential themes to portray in a Buddhist novel, since each are common worldly aims that stand in the way of renunciation. However, of all the worldly aims depicted in the literary traditions of North America and Europe—even in Buddhist novels—the limits of the happiness promised by romantic love is the least challenged. In most instances, romantic love enjoys a much more positive rendering than wealth or power despite some equally obvious drawbacks. Those who turn their back on wealth and power are more frequently respected and understood, than those who attempt to find a longer-term happiness outside of romantic love. Contemporary society's fixation on the happiness of romantic love is nothing new. The early Buddhist *kāvyas*, written thousands of years ago, spend a tremendous amount of time highlighting the drawbacks of romantic love *because* the people of that time also found it challenging to imagine a happiness beyond it.

In keeping with the early Buddhist *kāvyas*, *The Unravelers* suggests the possibility of the higher happiness of renunciation that is available for contemporary culture as well. To this end, the novel includes a subordinate *rasa* which is a variation of love *rasa*, known as love in separation (or disappointed love). In the typical love *rasa*, the characters' desire union with one another (Patnaik 82) and achieve it by the end of the work. When literature presents an isolated, individual lifetime as the only shot at happiness, it is easier to settle for the more obvious happiness that is offered by romantic love. But within a multi-lifetime narrative such as *The Unravelers*, romantic love can more easily be presented as a short-term gain or a distraction at best. *The Unravelers* takes this reflection even further, presenting the results of romantic love at its worst: as

an opening into nourishing qualities such as greed and anger that would lead to the realms of depravation, into the hells. Of course, one could argue that greed and anger are different from love, but in fiction as well as in life, the positive and negative sides of affection often bleed into one another. Two examples are Vanessa's romantic interest that ends in her rape in the chapter, "Vanessa: Amelie," and Jules's suicide in the chapter "Jules: Lotuses" following a loss of love of various types (her brother Ryan's tragic death, a romantic break-up with Vanessa, and Sorintino's cheating on her). Kai provides an example of a character resisting romantic reunion in favor of choosing renunciation in his later Colorado chapters.

The night before Kai climbs the Great Divide, he reflects on the elements closing in around him. Despite the threat, he returns to bed (262, 426). This suggests a repeated mode of behavior for him in the face of aging, illness, and death—to slip under the covers of the sensual pleasure and the emotional security of love while neglecting his own meditation practice. In an earlier passage, Kai reflects on the entrapping, repetitive nature of his experience of love and relationships:

For over twenty-five years it drove me to splice the formula back together—find a town, find food that I liked, find a new job I could stomach, and find a new girl. A distinct feeling of pleasure and pain permeated everything. When pleasure rose, I tried to it ride it longer each time. When the pain came, I patched it . . . But this time the question has a different tone. "*What next?*" (191)

Love in separation offers two options in a narrative. First, love in separation can focus on hope for reunion, but if this is achieved, it offers only a similarly limited conclusion to the common love story (Patnaik 117). When taking the multi-lifetime implications of karma into effect, reunion is not a happy ending because one will have to lose those

pleasures all over again, if not during this life, then at its conclusion. Alternatively, and more inspiringly in a Buddhist context, love in separation can be used as it is in *The Unravelers*, to spark reflection and ultimately renunciation (Patnaik 87), opening opportunities for other longer-lasting forms of happiness based on building skillful qualities into the mind. Just as love and longing produce karma that is carried into the next life (the karma of again looking for love and longing), so too the karma of skillful mental qualities return in the form of skillful teachers or situations conducive to learning the dharma.

The Unravelers depicts Vanessa's difficulty parting with Jules, and also Kai's difficulty abandoning his pursuit of Isabel. Vanessa and Jules are portrayed in a short scene meeting at college and then the narrative cuts to their separation on the first day of the new millennium, the last day they spend together. Rather than focusing on the brief pleasures of the novel's various relationships, *The Unravelers* emphasizes the karma the characters are left with when they end. Vanessa and Jules' last moments together are portrayed at the airport, and extend as Jules reads Vanessa's good-bye letter on the plane, and then are explored further through a flashback to the previous night when a Maori performer sang a slightly edited version of the traditional folk song "Pokarakare Ana," ending,

Oh girl

return to me

I could die

of love for you

I could die

of love

The scene closes with the two woman on the beach: “‘I could die of love,’ Jules reads, clutching my sweatshirt tight in both fists.

‘I know,’ I say, unhooking a hand from me. ‘I know’” (163).

Jules is an especially volatile character, and she is less able to step back from her emotions than the novel’s other characters. When Vanessa says that she *knows* that Jules could die of love, it is because she knows Jules is capable of diving into her passions, her emotions, without any thought of what dark places such unrestrained actions might lead her to. Jules eventual suicide drives home the message that the happiness of love by itself cannot alone keep one buoyed forever. “It’s not our deaths that bother me, it’s that love itself can die,” Jules laments (109).

Kai and Isabel are also depicted together during the process of their breakup: driving around the mountains arguing about whether to have children or head into the desert to meditate, or hiking together despite conflicting desires about how high they want to climb. Kai spends much of his narrative in his return to Boulder rehashing what went wrong with Isabel, while simultaneously warning himself about the drawbacks of going back to her or finding another romantic relationship.

When love and other forms of sensual craving are depicted in *The Unravelers*, like in the early Buddhist *kāvya*s, they often come with a warning, since the abandoning of craving is a necessity for one who hopes to achieve long-term happiness. For example, in the *Udāna*, when the Buddha comes upon a town fixated on sensual pleasures he exclaims:

Blinded by sensuality
covered by the net,
veiled with the veil of craving
bound by the Kinsman of the heedless [Mara]

like fish in the mouth of a trap,
 they go to aging & death,
 like a milk-drinking calf to its mother. (*Udāna* 7:4)

In *The Unravelers*, this poem appears to Kai (244) shortly after returning to the town of Boulder when he is in the midst of a fruitless search for Isabel. His questions are those of right mindfulness: he struggles to sort out which are the lessons he has learned in the past that he might also apply in the present to counteract his craving. He asks himself, “Will I remember the mistakes that brought me here—that even the pleasant places expire? Or will Contact help me to forget, to take away the unnecessary concern that these rooms are endless, that they will never be stable, that their lattice is constantly fraying” (244). Kai keeps his craving at bay, but does not fully renounce his hope of a reunion with Isabel until the very last scene of the novel along the Great Divide.

The love that is depicted in the early Buddhist *kāvya*s as well as *The Unravelers* is consistent with the renunciate, and therefore calming end, of love in separation. Linda Covill explains that in Aśvaghoṣa’s *Handsome Nanda*, the *kāvya* conventions of romantic yearning are similarly flouted.

Most memorably, Nanda’s desire to return to his lovely wife, a topic that in full-blown *kāvya* would be accompanied by such stock-in-trade as peacocks calling, the monsoon arriving and other commonplaces designed to evoke the *rasa* of disappointed love (*vipralambha-śṛṅgāra*), is here stated with down-to-earth vulgarity: he is a dog wanting to eat his own vomit (8:21). (Covill, *A Metaphorical Study* 65)

Handsome Nanda, discussed in more detail in the next section, provides a template for *The Unravelers*’ calm through its presentations of both the less appealing side of love as well as its dangers. In each book, the end results for each of the characters who abandon

sensuality proves not only worthwhile, but extraordinary. Again, this is how calm helps support the more energizing main *rasas* of *The Unravelers*. In *The Unravelers*, soon after giving up on their respective romantic pursuits, characters gain insights into the clinging that keeps them feeding on (and therefore tied to) a certain location, and opens up the Buddhist path. Vanessa sees the path for the first time from a room on the ferry, immediately after she has given up her intention to dive fruitlessly into the sea to pull Jules out of a hell realm. Kairos, similarly sees the path along the Great Divide, immediately after he says no to a reunion with Isabel.

Love in separation can invoke not only the pleasure of following the renunciate path, but also the pleasure of the longest-lasting goal, that of achieving something unchanging, the deathless happiness of awakening. In the case of Āśvaghoṣa's *Handsome Nanda*, Nanda not only becomes a willing renunciate, but practices meditation to the point of full awakening. The renunciate end to the supportive love in separation *rasa* fits both *Handsome Nanda* and *The Unravelers* perfectly, as it also blends back into their shared primary *rasa* of the astounding. Āśvaghoṣa's presentation of this higher happiness outside of sensuality is nothing short of miraculous. Nanda is awed by the freedom that results in putting an end to sensual passions. Since North American and European culture is even less familiar with the practice of abandoning romantic love for the sake of happiness, the renunciate end to love in separation in *The Unravelers* further heightens the work's primary use of the astounding *rasa*.

The presentation of love in separation, when presented in a way that is consistent with Buddhist practice, can also at times move close to the *rasa* of humor (*harsa*) where the lover can step back and laugh at his foibles so that he or she might continue along the path. Humor can serve as a mitigating factor, keeping the narrative buoyant where even extreme sorrow and loss is not seen as an impossible situation to overcome (Patnaik 229).

There are many moments in *The Unravelers*, such as after Jules' suicide when humor helps keep the narrative from becoming too dark to be enjoyed. Jules imagines lobstermen pulling her up out of her post-suicide hell.

What a surprise it would be for the lobstermen when they come retrieve their haul. What a catch, they'd say. What a beautiful young lady. Too bad she's dead. And then fish will flop out of my mouth onto their boat, and they'll jump back and a lobsterman will slip on his back, his yellow boots in the air, and the real me will be laughing at them from heaven.

Why am I not in heaven? Is it the way that I died? (99)

Jules, like the quote from the *Udāna* above, is one of these “fish [or lobsters in her case] in the mouth of a [craving's] trap.” Even when she escapes her traps, she continues to follow her passions and go back to them out of habit, never realizing that she has other choices. She is the most tragic figure in *The Unravelers* due to her inability to imagine a higher happiness than sensuality and love.

The Buddha often presents sensual cravings through metaphors that are as shocking to us today as they were to people in his time. As the earlier example from the *Udāna* explains (342): sensual cravings create blindness, they are a net, a veil, they bind us, they are a trap. There is nothing more natural than a calf running to its mother for milk, and yet, as in the poem, the mother offers the calf (a stand-in for humanity) not life, but aging and death over and over. From the Buddhist point of view, sensual craving is the worst kind of trap, one which gives all appearances of looking out for the helpless and hungry, but has nothing to offer long-term but deliverance to more hunger and more death. Similarly, if the experience of the calmed *rasa* in a Buddhist novel is to be consistent with the early Buddhist *kāvyas*, it must be based on the elimination of sensual aims, or of replacing sensual aims with intentions that are “right”—that is, consistent

with the path. Only then can the astounding *rasa* astound and the heroic *rasa* appear truly heroic in a Buddhist sense.

V. Metaphor in Aśvaghoṣa's *Handsome Nanda* and *The Unravelers*

Narrative Cohesion through Metaphor

The theme of sensuality, and depicting it through metaphors present in the *Pāli* Canon, is famously pursued by Aśvaghoṣa, in his early Buddhist *kāvya*, *Handsome Nanda*, which expands upon the earlier canonical story of the Buddha's cousin, Nanda, found in the *Udāna*. The *Udāna*'s report on Nanda begins by tracking his dissatisfaction with life as a monk due to a memory of a girl from his village, “the envy of the countryside,” who told him, “Hurry back,” as he left home (*Udāna* 3:2 *Nanda*). The account in the *Udāna* quickly reports two key events: 1) The Buddha takes Nanda to heaven where they see 500 dove-footed nymphs and Nanda immediately shifts his intoxication to them. Nanda compares the village girl to a “cauterized monkey” in comparison to the nymphs. The Buddha explains that the nymphs will be his reward after this lifetime, if he remains a monk. 2) After returning, Nanda is humiliated by the other monks for less-than-noble motivation, after which Nanda practices for the sake of transcending his sensual fixation, going beyond even the pleasures of heaven. As a result, Nanda rapidly gains awakening, which is depicted in poetic verse at the story's conclusion, and is described through the metaphors of crossing over the “mire of sensuality” and crushing “the thorn of sensuality” (*Udāna* 3:2 *Nanda*).

Linda Covill notes the uniqueness of Aśvaghoṣa's later version of the story, compared to earlier versions of the legend, such as the above, in terms of its “emphasis on internal psychology . . . [and especially in its] use of figurative language” (*A Metaphorical Study* 70). In Aśvaghoṣa's version, the trip to heaven is only one of many

lessons. Throughout his narrative, the details of characterization and motivation are also more fully explored (59). For example, Āśvaghōṣa's Nanda legend depicts the Buddha coercing Nanda out of the householder's life despite his obsession with his wife, and later includes extensive advice from the Buddha's attendant Anānda, as well as another unnamed monk as to the way one should practice to undercut sensual craving.

Analyzing prior scholarship on *Handsome Nanda*, Covill cites their two disparate foci: 1) in the "belletristic aspects" that dominate in the book's first half and 2) in the Buddhist basis of the book's second half (2-7). Warder, for example, points out the most striking teaching in Āśvaghōṣa's "exposition of the Four Truths (Canto XVI) of unhappiness and the way to end it, the essence of Buddhism, at the climax of the poem" (Warder, vol. II 170). Covill agrees that Āśvaghōṣa's message was primary and his language subordinate (*A Metaphorical Study* 17), but suggests a synthesis of style and Buddhist teachings in the book's use of metaphor. She argues that the metaphors tell "mini stories" of Nanda's conversion and "criss-cross the text, functioning as connectives between the two apparently disparate 'halves'" (6-7).

The Unravelers similarly uses stylistic literary devices to best support the presentation of Buddhist themes. Its multiple-narrator and energetic interwoven form provides unexpected narrative angles consistent with the astounding *rasa*. The continuity of metaphors and objects is one way the novel introduces Buddhist ideas and alerts the reader to character change. The central metaphor in *The Unravelers* are aspects of dependent co-arising: the strings of sensuality, which provide the openings for becoming, and the strings of intention which characters follow into the next room, the next world. The escape from the strings is expressed through the metaphor of the white light of the lantern—the depiction of right concentration, the central factor of the Buddhist path. The

goal is depicted through the metaphor of the lost city. Both the lantern and the city are discussed in the next section below.

Āsvaghoṣa most famously and succinctly summarizes his use of two metaphors in *Handsome Nanda*'s final two paragraphs. Here, he addresses the reader directly, summarizing his use of two metaphors from the *Pāli* Canon: that of medical healing and gold refining:

This composition on the subject of liberation is for calming the reader, not for his pleasure. It is fashioned out of the medicine of poetry with the intention of capturing an audience whose minds are on other things.

Thinking how it could be made pleasant, I have handled in it things other than liberation, things introduced due to the character of poetry, as bitter medicine is mixed with honey when it is drunk.

Seeing that the world generally holds the pleasure of sensory experience uppermost and is resistant to liberation, I, holding liberation to be paramount, have described the truth in the guise of poetry. Knowing this, that part which relates to peace should be carefully extracted from it, not the entertaining part; serviceable gold necessarily comes from ore-born dust. (363, 365)

Āsvaghoṣa presents the intention of his writing and the anticipated karma of reading *Handsome Nanda* within these two metaphors. He demonstrates that the Buddhist practice that Nanda uses to refine himself, and to move from sickness to health, might also be applied in meditation training by his reader.

The Unravelers does not offer a summary of the Buddha's teachings, or detail his meditation training, but like *Handsome Nanda*, it uses Buddhist metaphors to create cohesion between its sections, bridging the divide between the four main narrators. The

metaphor of the strings brings the characters together, and intimates that all the characters are engaging in the process of becoming. The way each character relates to craving (the stings of sensuality) demonstrates their respective level of control over their worlds, and influences how well they can transition between them. Through their use of the strings, the characters produce the type of flavors they want to taste, and then enter those worlds, modeling the karma of reading in a more layered novelistic way than that offered in *Nanda*.

Conceptual Metaphor and Objectifying Craving

Covill's thesis is that each of Aśvaghōṣa's five root metaphors shares the overall conceptual metaphor of Buddhist conversion. "Each metaphor," she writes, "to some extent incorporates into its target domain Nanda's initial state, his final state, and a converting action which produces the change from the former to the latter" (280). Each of the "root metaphors," depict Nanda's movement from one state of being ("worldliness") to another ("spiritual perfection") (*A Metaphorical Study* 6). Three of the four main protagonists within *The Unravelers* follow this pattern, moving from a state of bewilderment to that of stepping onto the Buddhist path, while the fourth, Jules, remains true to her root metaphor of the lobster trap, and does not make strides to get out of the world as the other protagonists. None of the three characters who find the path achieve a state of perfection like Nanda does, but each can be considered "converted" by the novel's conclusion: Vanessa through The Guild, and Leo and Kai through Vanessa.

The Unravelers' conceptual metaphor, although related to conversion, is more precisely that of becoming—the process of creating and entering a world—a metaphor that relates both to the actions of the characters and the experience of the reader. As characters convert to the path of practice, they are committing to mastering the process of

becoming in order to go beyond it. Instead of the root metaphors used in *Handsome Nanda* to depict this process of conversion, *The Unravelers* utilizes physical objects to depict the past karma of each character. Since craving and suffering are real, this concretization of metaphor helps the reader to follow the level of skill (present karma) by which the characters thread past action (past karma) into the present moment. Their interactions with these objects, as the narrative progresses, concretely demonstrate the processes by which each character gains skill in the manipulation of their past karma in order to birth worlds more conducive to awakening. The objects of past karma, analyzed below, are specific to each character in *The Unravelers*. These objects tie back to the conceptual metaphor of becoming and even more specifically, the craving that leads to becoming. Craving is symbolized in the novel by the strings of sensuality and becoming is the process by which characters enter worlds through these strings, either moving toward conversion and freedom (unraveling) or more entrapment (further tangles of complication within complication).

In the novel's metaphoric structure, imagery itself travels and changes, mirroring the inner transformations of its characters. At the start of the novel Vanessa cuts flowers with a pocket knife. The flowers then become the strings of her black room. With the knife in her pocket, Vanessa enters the expansive room of the field, reveling in all her karmic possibilities. This elevated birth does not last, because the knife Vanessa takes with her—symbolic of her desire to take revenge on her rapist, Leo—pulls her down into hell realms under the earth. Later, when Vanessa faces Leo in the meditation center, she is reminded of her mediation training (a practice symbolized by the lantern which is discussed in the next segment), and she finally drops the knife. The disappearance of the knife is symbolic of dropping her intention to take further revenge against Leo (although she does not fully get onto the path until she also leaves behind the red love seat).

The object of the red love seat—the same one that Vanessa was raped on—is present in nearly every room she enters until the last chapters of the book. It is a symbol of her trauma—the same trauma that she also brought into her romantic relationship with Jules in search of healing. On the ferry, a member of The Guild advises her to relinquish her repeated efforts to rescue Jules, by diving after her into the ocean. “‘You’ve tried,’ he says. ‘And tried. It’s not that they don’t already have openings. Why don’t you show them how to walk through a different door?’” (176).

It is only when Vanessa stops attempting to rescue Jules, and moves on from her fixation with her own trauma, when she provides an example of someone consciously choosing to leave a trauma behind, that the red love seat disappears from Vanessa’s narrative. From this point forward, Vanessa is depicted as effective guide to the characters receptive to her help: Kai and Leo. She helps them move past their craving as all three of them advance toward the Great Divide. To demonstrate her attainment of a guide’s level of knowledge about becoming, there are marked differences between Vanessa’s black room where she continually falls into lower realms, and the pavilion on the ferry from which she also enters worlds, but with a higher purpose and greater detachment. In the pavilion, Vanessa lets go of the map that has brought her to the path, and even lets go of her name, and the identity of victim associated with it. The doors of the pavilion, are depicted as opening around her in all directions, recalling the field of karma. There is nothing left from her past to pull her down and to obstruct her path forward. Within this new space, she is able to help both Leo and Kai find new births on the Buddhist path.

Leo is shown after death with the object of a crack-pipe that has become his very mouth, the karma left over from his drug use and related unskillful behavior such as stealing and dealing drugs. The crack pipe and its uncontrollable addiction is separated

from his body when Vanessa consumes him during sex on an underground train. The crack-pipe karma, however, continues until he can separate himself from it consciously. The increase of his skill in the process of becoming only comes later, when Vanessa helps guide him to a short life where he is stricken with the infectious disease of the “Glob,” a life of illness that he uses to overcome his habitual hungers. Vanessa explains Leo’s insight: “You recognize the repetition between lifetimes. What have you done to be back here? Does it matter? You are as hungry as last time. You vow to do everything not to continue this cycle. You are more hungry for it to stop” (266). In this short life, Leo’s crack-pipe mouth is transformed into the Glob, a string-like blockage in his throat, that kills him. During the process of his death he finally shifts how he feeds—taking nourishment from his concentration practice (detailed below in relationship to the metaphor of the lantern) rather than the world around him. His death here is one of the most peaceful scenes of the book and depicts the renunciate path in micro—he leaves his body through this short life; Leo becomes a monk, in part to continue his practice of not taking anything from anyone, and also to pay back his karma by existing now only on the generosity of others.

Kai possesses an arrowhead that always points in the direction of his craving, such as when he finds it in “Kairos: Birth,” and it points out into the sea of becoming. Later, the arrowhead points home to New York or toward Isabel: the places he will narrate about throughout the novel. But at the end it points west, toward the path and he uses the arrowhead to cut off the string of craving that the doctors of Contact tied onto his wrist.

Jules is often depicted with lobster traps connected by strings. When she is depressed, she is beside or inside them, underwater. She has opportunities to get out of the traps, but is fixated on continuing to look for her dead brother, along the sea floor. In

happier moments, the traps and strings appear as a chair lift carrying her up to the top of the mountain where her brother is waiting. This recurrence of traps and strings even in more heavenly locations remind the reader of the novel's Buddhist warning: all realms of existence are subject to change and decay, and cannot be relied upon for a permanent happiness. Jules' ski-lift scene both introduces her in the novel's opening and recurs as the very last words of the novel. The top of the mountain might have potentially been a good location for Jules to fabricate more skillful worlds of becoming like the other characters. However, her beginning and ending places in the novel remain similar. In the opening, she is trapped on the chair lift, forced to ride back down the mountain because she believes that suicides, like herself, belong only in hell: "I gave myself to water again and again. I met the same people in new cages. I keep making the same mistakes under different names" (25-26). The repeated scene at the close of the novel ends with Jules still believing there is no choice, but this time due to her lack of imagination. The closing version of the scene does have differences from Jules' opening—her brother Ryan is wearing snowboarding pants instead of lobsterman oil pants, and Jules extricates herself from the "cage" of the chairlift. She is in ecstasy at her escape from hell and presence of her brother, but when they look back east, down the slope (which is always used when characters look backwards in time or to a lower realm) Ryan asks only, "[S]hould we dive into it again?" and Jules answers "What else would we do? . . . What other choices would we have" (286). Whether she means to go back to hell, or dive randomly into some other birth, the implication is clear: Jules is not committed to the creation of worlds for the sake of ending them. She is not walking the Buddhist path to get out of illness, old age, birth, and death. She is still trapped by her craving. Her ups and downs will likely continue for some time.

The Elements as Appropriate Attention

In *The Unravelers*, development along the path is symbolized by the changes in the way the characters relate to their past karma objects. Objects that do not have a use on the Buddhist path are symbols of craving that are simply pulling the character down. The duty in regard to craving in accordance with *Samyutta Nikāya* 56.11 is to abandon it (466). Objects that should be abandoned include the pocket knife, the love seat, the crack-pipe, and the lobster traps. Only once the character's craving associated with these objects is abandoned, can they progress. Kai also demonstrates how an object (a source of clinging) can be repurposed as he develops on the path. He uses the arrowhead to cut the strings of sensuality and get on to the path. There is no need for him to drop the arrowhead as long as it is helpful on the path.

The characters build up to the moment when the abandoning or repurposing of an object by developing internal strength through concentration practice (often depicted as balancing the internal elements), and by reflecting on the fundamental dangers that lie in wait in every state of becoming (represented by the external elements). One way to practice meditation often depicted in the early Buddhist *kāvya*s is by observing and manipulating the elements as felt internally—water (coolness), earth (solidity), fire (heat), and wind (breath). The breath is the most common way the Buddha teaches meditation in the *Pāli* Canon, and the practice of breath meditation involves the other three elements as well. Contact's Dr. Dean orients Kai by explaining to him how to build a happier virtual world within Contact by using the elements. Dr. Dean is an example of someone with some knowledge of meditation, but he does not apply the skill within the context of the four noble truths, but for the sake of deva pleasures instead. Instead of practicing for the sake of ending stress and suffering, Dr. Dean and Contact attempt to stabilize and sell a refined sensual pleasure. While Contact does not charge money, there

are “strings attached” in that clients are all obligated by contract to help the company achieve its less-than-noble aims.

“Start with your breath.” [Dr. Dean] turns the screen back on and continues. “Where do you feel density? . . . Where is the heat? . . . Try to stay *in* the body for me. Felt sense. Where is the coolness? . . . How does coolness *feel* in the *body*. The *body*. His voice is alarmed, his head closer, almost wrapping around me like a photo taken with a fish-eye lens.

“Where do you *feel energy*?” (241-42)

This is not the first time Kai has been introduced to manipulating the elements within the body, but the context for the practice has changed here to the virtual world of Contact. Previously, in their lives in New York, Vanessa and Jules practice at a lay dharma center in search of healing from their respective traumas (Vanessa’s rape and Jules’ loss of her brother). A young Kai, then a student and budding meditator, meets the women in a Buddhism course and often accompanies them to the lay dharma center.

The lay dharma center is the only place in the novel besides the Great Divide where Vanessa and Kai are shown occupying space at the same time. The scene takes place after both of their deaths and demonstrates the strength of the karma they made meditating together in college. Even though they only practiced together for a short period during this prior lifetime, it plants an important seed in each of them, which germinates at a turning point in both of their narratives. Kai is a type of hungry ghost, wandering the canyons of Utah, searching for the inner resources to make his way back to Colorado. Vanessa is also in need of strength because she is about to confront Leo again—the next person that will walk into the center once Kai leaves. Vanessa has already failed to resolve her karma with Leo, but drawing on her meditation practice gives her the stability to move forward.

Kai and Vanessa help each other remember how to light an old lantern until “[t]he mantle absorbs the flame and every thread becomes a dazzling white” (116). This is a metaphor for right concentration—filling the entire body with breath energy until it seems to glow—and was used often in the teaching career of Ajaan Lee (1906-1961), a well-known teacher in the Thai Forest tradition who taught an innovative version of the Buddha’s breath-meditation practice (*Inner Strength, Food for Thought*). We have already analyzed his dhamma talk “Consciousnesses” in section II. Those familiar with Ajaan Lee’s teachings on breath meditation will notice the reference to his technique in *The Unravelers* even though his name is not mentioned.

“Didn’t we light this with a monk visiting Forest Dhamma?” I look up at the ceiling to help me remember. “He read a talk while we meditated. He used the lantern as some kind of metaphor.” I close my eyes, struggling for the memory. My arm is fatigued from holding the lantern up. I set it down and put my hands in my lap.

“Protecting the flame is mindfulness,” Kai says. “Lighting all sides of the mantle is spreading the breath through the body. The kerosene is the right effort that grows mindfulness into the white light of the concentration—that steady light that fills the room.” (116)

The healing and stability of the concentration practice that Vanessa and Kai remember in this scene helps them during the rest of their journey to the Great Divide. Kai returns to Colorado following the lantern scene and is depicted meditating regularly there, indulging in the rapture and pleasure of the practice as he slowly begins to pry himself from his sensual craving (especially for Isabel). Records of the Buddha’s own path of practice are well-documented in the *Pāli* Canon, and even the casual practitioner tends to be aware that the Buddha did not reach awakening until he gave up on his path

of severe austerities and found right concentration. What tends to be discussed less are the dangers of the other extreme, sensual indulgence. The withdrawal from sensuality, however, was part of the definition the Buddha gave to right concentration. Right concentration was the first path factor he discovered, and all the other path factors are—in *Majjhima Nikāya* 117—described as its requisites (480-85).

The definition of right concentration in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 45:8 reads:

And what, monks, is right concentration? There is the case where a monk — quite secluded from sensuality¹¹, secluded from unskillful qualities — enters & remains in the first *jhāna*: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. (394)

So while the *Anguttara Nikāya* 5.28 reports an intense pleasure experienced in the body in the first *jhāna* of right concentration—the meditator “permeates and pervades, suffuses and fills this very body with the rapture and pleasure born from seclusion” (185)—right concentration can only be achieved by first stepping back (at least for the time being) from sensuality, something both Kai and Vanessa achieve by untangling themselves from the entrapments of their past relationships. They can then make even longer-term determinations as they step into the next life from the Great Divide.

As for Vanessa, the lantern scene at the lay dharma center sets up a domino effect of change in the scenes following. Leo climbs up out of hell to find Vanessa, and after an apology of sorts, he leaves her alone in the meditation hall, where she recalls her rape. At the end of the recollection, she has the insight that she has “been carrying that knife ever since, just waiting for the place to stick it” (128). Instead of seeking further revenge, Vanessa, in a moment of healing, expands her reflection to the suffering of all beings.

¹¹According to Thānissaro Bhikkhu, “the Buddha defines sensuality, not as the objects of the senses, but as the passion and delight that one feels for such objects” (*Wings* 206; *Handful of Leaves Vol. Four* 302).

She spreads good will to the dead of the entire city and beyond. Goodwill (one of the four *brahmāviharas*, or dwelling places of the gods) is a classic way to close meditation and also to deal with lingering feelings of ill-will.

I think of all of the people that died as I look at the city through the veil of rain falling harder now, and beyond them, of everyone I knew in that life: family, friends, even the people I passed daily but never knew . . . I call the names until I run out of names. I picture faces until they stop appearing. I lose myself to the feeling. (129)

Vanessa then drops her knife and leaves the lay dharma center, switching her attention to finding and helping Jules.

During his past life, Leo also attends some of the group meditation sessions as a way to find help with his addictions. The meditation does not seem to aid him much at the time, but after Vanessa helps him out of hell, Leo reflects on what he gained at the lay dharma center, particularly when a forest monk visited, as he reviews his past life, unscrolling on the train window (another kind of “screen”).

these days I have a sense of where the doorways go, and the skill to not step into them. Couple of trips into the city to meditate are still paying dividends . . . Who knows, one day I might catch up to that forest monk and say thanks. Since I helped pay for his plane fare to come back to teach in the city, does that means I get to see him again one day? Maybe somewhere? I don’t know if it works exactly like that, but it might. (208-9)

The lantern image also comes back into the narrative during Leo’s next short life where he is stricken with the Glob. During his death, he very deliberately engages in the process of becoming, as he leaves behind his old habitual ways of feeding. Leo navigates

the process of entering a new world through the breath meditation practice. The breath fills Leo's entire body, recalling how light enveloped every thread of the mantel in the lantern image given above by Vanessa at the lay dharma center.

Vanessa narrates this chapter, presenting the possibility of this birth directly to Leo through second person voice. This voice is indicative of her level of detachment toward Leo's craving and provides a taste of the detachment that Leo too may develop if he takes on the challenge of this birth. The switch to second person is also an invitation to the reader to taste, through Leo's transformation, the stepping back from a character's ingrained craving and identification with it.

The heart expands to fill the surface of your skin, to fragment so that it might occupy all corners of your loom-body. The neon orange fibers whisper as they emerge from your pores. The tiny neon threads wave, buoyant as if underwater, and you begin to weave them around your body: a blanket of light. You think *stretch*, and the blanket covers your body in its warm comfort. As the ends combine around you, they glow like the mantle of a lantern. You feel a different type of fullness. You sit up. You leave the body to your I.V. (266-67)

After this scene, the next time we see Leo is walking the path from the Great Divide as a monk, where Kai puts food into his bowl. Kai is depicted as meditating several times, leading up to his decision to make the climb to the Great Divide, but it is actually his external reflection on the elements that gives him his final motivation to seek the forest monks whom he had once met at the lay dharma center.

Appropriate attention is not only applied internally through concentration practice by Vanessa and Kai, but externally as well. Externally, the elements are described as unstable, dangerous, and resistant to human control. According to the *suttas*, there comes

a time, for example, where even the apparently dependable earth property vanishes. In *Majjhima Nikāya* 28 Ven. Sāriputta teaches this reflection, saying,

when even in the external earth property—so vast—inconstancy will be discerned, destructibility will be discerned, a tendency to decay will be discerned, changeability will be discerned, then what of this short-lasting body, sustained by clinging is ‘I’ of ‘mine’ or ‘what I am’? It has here only a ‘no.’ (130-39)

This prompt to practice and to overcome clinging is also depicted, among other places, in the Buddha’s teaching to King Pasenadi Kosala in *Samyutta Nikāya* 3.25:

Like massive boulders,
mountains pressing against the sky,
moving in from all sides,
crushing the four directions,
so aging and death
come rolling over living beings:
noble warriors, brahmans, merchants,
workers, outcastes, & scavengers.
They spare nothing.
They trample everything. (36-37)

The Unravelers also reminds the reader of the inevitable destruction of anything based on the elements—whether they be in external or the internal makeup of the body itself—through the experiences of both Kai and Vanessa. As these two characters approach the divide at the end of the narrative, and their pending rebirth, their reflection on the elements intensifies and broadens. Kai attends appropriately to the inherent instability of

all the elements. In his last night in his room in Colorado, Kai recalls a night fires threatened Boulder:

I looked at Isabel, placidly dreaming. What if we picked up our phones and we all dial 9-1-1, just for assurances? What if the 911 operators were better informed this time? Will they report that fire was coming from the west? That fire is also closing in from the east? That fire is blowing down from the north? That fire is also rising up from the south? That the escape routes are closed? Or will they let us wait and find this out for ourselves? Will they tell us nothing is certain, that ageing, illness, and death will inevitably come? Or would they tell us to all go back to sleep?

“Kairos,” Isabel said. “Come back to bed.” (262)

At the top of the divide when Kai finally sees his guide, Vanessa, face to face, he asks her how she came to seek an exit from the world, asking: “Where was your opening?” (279). Vanessa explains her own deliberate reflections on the instability of the elements. This is what motivates Vanessa to seek a birth that will eventually lead beyond birth entirely.

Internal and external modes of appropriate attention are the very start of the Buddhist path. Like the early Buddhist *kāvyas* and the *Pāli* Canon, *The Unravelers* depicts reflections on the elements that help Vanessa, Kai, and Leo get onto the path and practices such as right concentration (symbolized by the lantern) that help the characters reorient themselves toward sensuality, ill-will, and greed. The narrative of *The Unravelers* does not take the practice to its conclusion, but points toward it implicitly with the presence of the lost city at the end of the path at the novel’s conclusion. These three characters view the safety of the lost city as a welcome alternative only after they thoroughly contemplate the drawbacks of all worlds built on the instability of the elements.

VI. The Buddhist Novel Then and Now: Jack Kerouac and Keith Kachtick

Section II's "Literary Review" explores the literary potential of the teachings in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon as found in the Theravāda tradition and explains how the narrative modes found there were developed and expanded into the genre of the Buddhist novel through *The Unravelers*. Kimberly Beek's contextualization of Buddhist fiction within *Buddhism Beyond Borders* (2015), the fifth volume of the *SUNY Series in Buddhism and American Culture*, was also discussed in section II, "as a new form of creative literary discourse that recontextualizes Buddhism in the West" ("Telling Tales Out of School" 125). The entire SUNY series, as we have established, exhibits the Buddhist novel as overwhelmingly influenced by Mahayana Buddhism and sometimes the Vajrayana tradition which came out of it, and lacking any significant basis in the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism.

Beek notes that the "defining characteristic of Buddhist fiction is a storyline that hinges on or is structured by distinctly Buddhist experience" (128), but without identifying what defines an experience as Buddhist. Two example Buddhist novels were provided in section II to demonstrate the elasticity of what qualifies as a "Buddhist experience," and then the section explores *The Unravelers* more traditional roots in the early Buddhist *Kāvyas* and the scarce contemporary Theravādin literature such as published *Dhamma* talks. For many in North America and Europe, their "Buddhist experience," has still not been depicted in the Buddhist novel. This is especially the case for those who base their practice on the Buddhist principles found in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon—a document regarded as a well-preserved and an authoritative account in the tradition of Theravāda of what the Buddha taught. These teachings that focus on the

development of dispassion have had little representation since *The Pilgrim Kamanita* (1906), which was also discussed in section II.

Before concluding this essay with *The Unravelers*' specific contributions to Buddhist novels, this section returns to the novels that have been emblematic of this genre as it has developed so far. Beek identifies *The Dharma Bums* as a "predecessor" (128) and Keith Kachtick's *Hungry Ghost* as "highly representative" (131) of the "emerging genre" of Buddhist fiction (128). In this section, I will continue to use these designations and expand on Beek's reasons for categorizing them as such, the most notable addition is how *Hungry Ghost* is bent—like Buddhist novels as a whole—toward eclecticism, a trait that *The Unravelers* necessarily resists in order to explore the literary potential of the *suttas* themselves and the teachings of Theravāda therein.

Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums*, Part II

Jack Kerouac's *The Dharma Bums* has been paradigmatic for the American understanding of the Buddhist novel. Of all the post-war novel that feature Buddhism, none have been more influential because it launched a "postwar Buddhist revival" in America based on Zen's timely appeal for the beats as "[a]nticonformist, antimaterialist, antiinstitution" (Mortenson 126, 127). As discussed in section II, Kerouac was introduced to Buddhism in 1954 (126) through the essays of Zen teacher D.T. Suzuki as reported to him by Allen Ginsberg (125). Suzuki was the most visible exponent of Buddhism in America during the period that Kerouac wrote *The Dharma Bums*. As a Zen teacher, Suzuki was deeply immersed in the Mahayana tradition, which stresses experiences of Oneness. In his books of essays, such as *Living by Zen* (1950), Suzuki repeatedly stresses that all things are "of absolute oneness" (45). Suzuki taught Oneness

through stories with shocking assertions, such as that when a monk eats a turnip, his master is also filled (44)¹².

The Dharma Bums depicts Kerouac in the middle of his immersion in these teachings, especially when portraying Gary Snyder as the character Japhy Ryder. The beats generally sought the ecstasy of an experience of Oneness, through their interpretation of Zen, (and Allen Ginsburg, later through the Tibetan Buddhist tradition). According to Kerouac, Snyder encouraged him to write a Buddhist sutra in 1956 (Waldman 1)—what would be published eventually as *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* (1970). In his sutra, Kerouac describes his notion of the Golden Eternity as a “state beyond mind where everything becomes One” (Mortenson 128). Kerouac’s Golden Eternity was his real-life equivalent of his protagonist Ray’s visions of Oneness in *The Dharma Bums*. Kerouac describes the Golden Eternity as a place where “nothing had ever happened, the events of a million years ago were just as phantom and ungraspable as the events of now or of a million years from now, or the events of the next ten minutes” (Kerouac, *The Scripture of the Golden Eternity* 59). He also calls it “the womb itself,” and “where it all came from and where it was all returning” (60).

Kerouac’s embrace of the concept of Oneness in *The Dharma Bums*, rooted in Suzuki’s Zen, is found throughout the novel and blurs distinctions even between

¹² In *Fistful of Sand* (1999) Thānissaro Bhikkhu gives an account of one of the first encounters he witnessed between a Thai Forest Ajaan and a large number of non-Asians at a 1989 retreat at Insight Meditation Society where he was serving as translator for Ajaan Suwat Suvaco (1). He recounts a question as follows: “A man new to the practice commented, ‘You guys would have a good religion here with this Buddhism if only you had a God. That way people would have some sense of support in their practice when things aren’t going well.’” Ajaan Suwat responded to the man, “If there were a God who could arrange that, by my taking a mouthful of food, all the beings in the world would become full, I’d bow down to that God. But I haven’t yet found anyone like that” (3). Ajaan Suwat’s response illustrates the lack of utility of Oneness as a realistic picture of reality and in doing so also points to it as a lesser outcome than the permanence of awakening. Ajaan Suwat’s statement also illustrates how an understanding of Oneness—such as that found in D.T. Suzuki’s and Kerouac’s Zen—as the goal of Buddhist practice is easily and often confused with that of other religions.

religions. At one point, Ray says to Japhy, “I felt suppressed by this schism we have about separating Buddhism from Christianity, East from West, what the hell difference does it make? We’re all in Heaven now, ain’t we?” (114). While this escapism is easy enough to justify through Kerouac’s concept of Oneness, it has a much harder time masquerading as the goal from the *suttas*. Ray’s statement is in direct contradiction with the Buddha’s first noble truth and the duty attached to it as noted in *Samyutta Nikāya* 56.11: that there is stress and suffering in life, and the duty is to comprehend it, not to pretend suffering does not exist (466). In a roundtable discussion held by Ann Charters, Carolyn Cassady backs Kerouac’s lover, Joyce Johnson when she notes that he “misused Buddhism as a way of rationalizing his deepest hang-ups rather than trying to overcome them” (qtd. in Mortenson 129).

In addition to its emphasis on Oneness, *Dharma Bums* has also been paradigmatic for the Buddhist novel in its de-emphasis of traditional Buddhist practices of *sila*, or virtue, such as the five precepts listed in *Anguttara Nikāya* 8.39 as “abandoning the taking of life . . . taking what is not given [stealing] . . . sexual misconduct . . . the telling of a lie . . . the use of intoxicants.” The beats as a whole were often willing to dispense with the moral and ethical aspects of Buddhism as an expression of the Mahayana “non-dual” teachings. At times, Japhy is portrayed as the ideal Buddhist recluse, quoting the Ch’an poet Han Shan about leaving behind the “world’s ties” (18) from his sparse hut, but just as often—and often in an adjacent scene—he and Ray are in the middle of the San Francisco parties and poetry scene (13-16, 24). The beats are portrayed in *The Dharma Bums* as nowhere near leaving the world behind. Even less, they do not practice right action as they are constantly portrayed as breaking the fifth precept by taking drugs or drinking and the third precept through engaging in sexual misconduct.

In an early scene Japhy is portrayed as encouraging his lover Princess' perception that their "Zen Free Love Lunacy orgies" are spiritually beneficial for her within the bounds of Tantric Buddhism, a viewpoint that has no footing in Theravāda or even Tantra. According to Ray, "she wanted to be a big Buddhist like Japhy and being a girl the only way she could express it was this way" and since it was connected to Tantric Buddhism, "everything was fine." Naked and in the bathtub, Princess calls herself a "Bodhissatva" after her participation (30-31). Later in the novel, another of Japhy's lovers sends him off on his way to a Zen monastery in Japan by offering to meet him in his cabin on the ship to "give you what you want" only to be thrown "clean off the boat" by Japhy afterward in order to keep her from taking the journey to Japan with him (215).

In "Religious Pluralism and the Beats" (2016), Luke Ferretter also investigates the above scenes in *The Dharma Bums* by framing them with Japhy's statement: "I distrust any kind of Buddhism or *any* kinda philosophy or social system that puts down sex" (30). Japhy's actions in the above scenes demonstrate a lack of distrust for his lust and the harm that it can cause if not checked by traditional Buddhist practices of virtue like the five precepts. Ferreter summarizes that Ray "is forced to reflect that Japhy's relationship to the women in his life is ethical according to some of the discourses out of which the religion of the Dharma bums is built, but unethical according to others" (414). It is safe to say that the source for such ethics is not the *suttas* of the *Pāli Canon*.

In the novel's opening, Ray claims to be aligned with the "oldfashioned dreamy Hinayana" Buddhist teachings (13) that at first might seem to suggest he has interest in practicing in line with Theravāda—meditation in conjunction with the five precepts, or even the more demanding eight precepts that includes the renunciate vow of celibacy he claims to practice but abandons off-hand in the scene with Princess (30). If his

abandonment of his celibacy is not a clear enough indication of Kerouac's views about which Buddhist teachings he aligns with, his letters define his position even more clearly. In Kerouac's 1956 letter to Philip Whalen, cited in James Najarian's essay, "The 'Problem' of Buddhism for Western Literature: Edwin Arnold to Jack Kerouac" (2016) reveals what Kerouac actually regarded as central—"no rules." Kerouac writes, "what rules would conform to pure essence Buddhism, say. That would be, I suppose, NO RULES. Pure Essence Buddhism is what I think I want, and lay aside all the arbitrary rest of it" (315).

Kerouac's "no rules" Buddhism contradicts the *suttas* of the *Pāli Canon*'s teachings on the principle of karma that are depicted in *The Unravelers*. As discussed in the introduction, the *suttas* teach that bodily, verbal, and mental actions should be trained relentlessly because these actions are what shape our present experience of the world and the worlds that will be entering into in our future—both psychological and cosmological—in *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.237. In this *sutta*, the Buddha teaches how one's injurious and non-injurious fabrications (bodily, verbal, and mental) produce four types of karma—"dark with dark result . . . bright with bright result . . . dark & bright with dark & bright result . . . neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result." The fabrication of these types of karma lead respectively to different types of rebirth in: "an injurious world . . . a non-injurious world . . . an injurious & injurious world . . . [and] leading to the end of kamma [i.e. awakening]" (178-79).

A mix of dark and bright karma can be seen in all the characters of *The Unravelers* as consistent with "human beings, some devas, and some beings in the lower realms" (*Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.237). Dark karma with dark results can be seen specifically in my novel in the breaking of the precepts. Leo's rape of Vanessa along with his drug abuse and stealing, and Jules' suicide result in birth in injurious worlds, the hells. Bright

karma with bright results, on the other hand, is depicted in *The Unravelers* in the three-fold Buddhist training consisting of acts of *sila*, *samādhi*, and *pañña* (virtue, concentration, and discernment) (*Digha Nikāya* 16). Vanessa is the most virtuous character as evidenced by how she not only refrains from breaking the precepts, but also attempts to assist all three other characters. Especially relevant are her efforts to help her rapist, Leo, in his transformation into a Buddhist monk over the course of two lifetimes. The virtue of Vanessa and other characters has been discussed in more detail in relation to the *Udāna* and *Dhammapada* in section II's "Literary Review" and IV's "The Heroic and Astounding *Rasas* in the Early Buddhist *Kāvyas* and *The Unravelers*."

The second part of the three-fold training, concentration, has been discussed in relation to its energizing qualities and calming qualities in IV's "The Heroic and Astounding *Rasas*," and "The Calmed *Rasa*," respectively, and both qualities are discussed together in section V's "The Elements as Appropriate Attention," in relation to my novel's use of the lantern as a metaphor for right concentration. Vanessa is also the most advanced character in her concentration practice. For example, she uses the energizing qualities of rapture to replenish herself in "Vanessa: A Light at the Surface" and the calming side of concentration to soothe herself before giving away her name in "Vanessa: Crossing." Virtue and concentration are used by all characters to a varying degree to apply and develop discernment in order to generate dispassion for their habitual becomings and make adjustments to their actions in order to lessen the resulting sufferings of their worlds. The major success for Leo and Kai is gaining entry onto the path that appears near the novel's conclusion (and Vanessa finds the path earlier in "Vanessa: Crossing"). In the final scene, we glimpse the possibility of the final category of karma, neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, in the appearance of

awakening as the lost city that appears at end of the path for Vanessa, Leo, and Kai (283-85).

The central understanding necessary in order to follow the Buddhist path is that there are in fact “rules”—the skill of one’s own actions (karma) is crucial to develop, and *The Unravelers* aims to be as clear on this point as possible. Kerouac, in relying on Oneness as the goal and “no rules” as the path, leaves little opening for careful observations of cause and effect in one’s everyday actions, to say nothing about his depiction of meditation practice. Najarian writes that “[t]he amount of popular and scholarly praise Kerouac has received as a Buddhist spiritual seeker is astonishing . . . one could argue that he was never really a Buddhist” (315).

It can be argued that Kerouac’s goal of Oneness and “no rules” Buddhist approach are less a full embrace of any particular Buddhist tradition and more ingredients to what Ferretter calls his “eclectic, American religion” (414). Ferretter writes that Ray in *The Dharma Bums* venerates Japhy’s “eclectic Buddhism,” and “offers [it] for the reader’s admiration.” Even though he calls Kerouac, “primarily a Buddhist,” he points out that “he incorporates many other discourses and traditions, including Native American religion, anarchism, and love of the wild into a new, eclectic, American religion that is the essence of what the novel means by being a Dharma bum” (414).

The Buddhist novel, as it has coalesced sixty years after *The Dharma Bums*, primarily bases its narratives on such an “eclectic Buddhism”—or perhaps more accurately the “eclectic, American religion”—rather than writing strictly from within a specific Buddhist tradition. Where the emphasis on Oneness within the Mahayana and Vajrayana regularly finds its way into the often eclectic Buddhist novel, Theravāda is necessarily left out, perhaps because its dualistic distinctions between the creation of

skillful and unskillful karma along the path of practice are especially clear and distinct and therefore more difficult to appropriate.

Keith Kachtick's *Hungry Ghost*, Part II

The Dharma Bums initiated the eclectic model applied in Buddhist novels, and among them Keith Kachtick's *Hungry Ghost* has been singled out as "highly representative" (Beek 131) of the emerging genre of Buddhist fiction (128). Beek offers Kachtick's protagonist, the "materialistic, womanizing bachelor" Carter Cox, as "a fictional example of the second noble truth, that *dukkha* stems from craving and clinging" (134). As we will see throughout the remainder of this section, however, Carter is actually representative of much more than a Buddhist principle, but Kachtick does develop Buddhist ideas more fully than Kerouac. For example, he depicts a more traditional Buddhist understanding than Kerouac and the Beats of right action—there are at least *some* rules. Blatantly unskillful behavior such as breaking the fourth precept of lying or the third of sexual misconduct or the fifth of taking intoxicants are depicted throughout the novel as resulting in suffering, especially in Kachtick's presentation of Carter's rebirth as a hungry ghost within the novel's alternative ending (240-48). Be that as it may, Kachtick's narrative does not go as far in its portrayal of the Buddhist path as the characters in *The Unravelers* who aim to find a happiness outside of sensuality. Instead, *Hungry Ghost* is aimed at achieving a worldly happiness through refining one's sensual pleasures. Carter's realization is that he can find happiness *within* the world by developing romantic love.

Although it is possible to achieve worldly happiness in a way that is in line with the teachings of the *suttas*, such as by practicing generosity and the five precepts, worldly happiness based on sensuality is never confused with awakening there. Instead of an awakening consistent with the *suttas*, as in *The Unravelers*, *Hungry Ghost* offers an

eclectic vision of awakening as synonymous with love. To support this depiction of a “Buddhist” awakening, *Hungry Ghost* constantly (and explicitly) offers a marriage between the teachings on love from other religions, philosophers, and writers, and Kachtick’s understanding of the Buddhist goal of awakening. The marriage is made literal in the novel’s final pages when Mia, a meditating Catholic, and Carter, an eclectic Buddhist, become engaged. My focus on Kachtick’s depiction of romantic love through eclecticism does not give me scope to write a full literary critical analysis. However, the main narrative drive of *Hungry Ghost* is worth establishing so that the reader can compare it to the goal of dispassion discussed throughout this essay as found both in *The Unravelers* and its influences, the early Buddhist *kāvyas*.

Kachtick’s main character, the thirty-eight-year-old globe-trotting photographer Carter, searches for his “higher nature,” his “Buddha nature” from the very start of the narrative (6). This quest is so central to the story that Kachtick narrates in second person, a point of view that Carter calls a “better” perspective from which people might think about themselves, “to fully disassociate their awareness from the obstructing, lower self ‘I’” (14). In between his sporadic search for his higher self, and sometimes during, Carter’s life is filled with hedonistic pursuits—most frequently those of sex and drugs. His eclectic mix of spirituality is described as “a self-concocted pastiche of cardiovascular exercise, seated meditation, mantra chanting, precept vows, and (with an increasingly strained rationale) moderate marijuana consumption” (9). In the opening chapter, he is depicted first as stoned and then as seducing a German woman, Greta, staying at the same Mexican beach compound. His “Buddha nature” is present during the conquest only in that he poses himself the question: “Do I want to be a bodhisattva or nibble on those Saxon breasts?” (7) before choosing the latter. Although he proceeds with the seduction, he holds to his vow of no intercourse during the encounter, managing to

please Greta through other methods (16-20). Carter is presented a character who clearly has much to learn from his Buddha nature before he can experience an awakening based on love. Meditation instruction helps him to inch closer.

When not traveling on assignment, Carter lives in New York where he is taught by a British lay dharma teacher, Christopher, who is slowly dying of AIDS, to allow his Buddha Nature to “rise naturally” (39). Christopher’s background is in both Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism (95) and his first teaching to Carter explains “the awakened heart of unconditioned love” (94). The similarities between the awakening experience and falling in love continue when Christopher compares Dharma to a song, advising Carter to, “breathe deeply, to let go and not give a bloody toss,” to dance so that “by the second song our muscles have loosened and we close our eyes and lose ourselves in the flow of the music. That second song,” he says, “is the Dharma” (28-29). It is clear that Kachtick holds to this advice since he gave it himself, nearly verbatim, in an article for *Texas Monthly*, “Let It Be: Looking for Inner Peace, Compassion for Others, and a Newfound Spirit of Generosity? More and More Texans Are Finding These Things in Buddhism” (2001). While Kachtick is comfortable presenting Buddhism in inventive ways, such as “a song,” he is not prepared to grant it a more traditional designation, writing, “Buddhism is not really a religion” (“Let It Be”). His position here confirms what is obvious from the text of *Hungry Ghost*—the nearly exclusive worldly uses of Buddhist ideas and practices in the novel are selected purposefully and are based on an eclectic ideology where even meditation is a teaching on love.

In his introduction to *You Are Not Here and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* (2006), Kachtick discusses his views on meditation, writing, “we often make ourselves miserable by focusing on what we think we *should* be feeling or doing rather than on what we actually are . . . Most of us just don’t know how to be with what *is*” (1). This is

Kachtick's most frequently used definition of suffering—we don't know how to be with things as they are—and it is found throughout *Hungry Ghost* as well. Upon his return home to New York from his photoshoot (and fling with Greta) in Mexico, Carter recalls his “first weekend-long meditation retreat” where he learned a similar teaching about being with “what is” when he reports that the “Buddha taught that meditation is *any* experience cultivated with selfless, mindful attention. Jogging, cooking, even taking photographs can be an exercise in Buddhism” (53). A reader might assume that the uses of meditation might intensify or deepen as Carter learns more, but he is mostly depicted as simply learning to rest in love and his Buddha Nature.

The *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon, on the other hand, define meditation as secluded from sensuality. For example, *Saṃyutta Nikāya* 45:8 defines right concentration as the meditator's ability to seclude the mind from sensuality and from unskillful qualities. Examples of characters secluding their minds within in *The Unravelers* can be found in section V's “The Elements as Appropriate Attention.” Kachtick more broadly favors meditation as *any* “selfless” and “mindful” experience and emphasizes meditation as having mostly mundane everyday applications—such as wringing more refined and pleasure out of Carter's above-mentioned commonplace activities. Kachtick repeats this definition of Buddhist meditation as “any experience” as found in *Hungry Ghost* (again, nearly verbatim) when writing his previously mentioned article on Buddhism for *Texas Monthly*, but instead of including photography as a form of meditation (which is more specific to the character of Carter), he ends his article with the telling line, “even making love can be an exercise in Buddhist spirituality” (“Let it Be”). This final teaching may be at first withheld in his novel, but is implicit as Mia and Carter move toward consummating their relationship. Carter's proposal to Mia in the novel's closing demonstrates a refinement in his quest to find awakening through love, a quest that began

on a less inspiring note when he floats himself the question, “Couldn’t we fuck *mindfully?*” (7) when seducing Greta in the book’s opening pages.

The Buddhist path of practice depicted in *Hungry Ghost* is that romantic love can be the focal part of a transcendent Buddhist practice, but Carter first learns to restrain himself and eventually to engage in sex only within certain moral and ethical confines, such as a committed relationship with Mia. Carter (who again is continually narrating through his higher self/Buddha Nature) concludes that, “life’s most rewarding experience is *unconditionally* [emphasis added] loving someone other than yourself” (55).

Kachtick’s emphasis on romantic love is also explicit in his stated goal in an interview published within his paperback, he writes, “I knew only this about *Hungry Ghost* when I wrote its first page: the book would be a portrait of spiritual growth and of the redemptive power of love, and would end with the words ‘I do’” (“Book Interview”).

However refined and ethical Carter becomes romantically, the novel’s teaching on love as the goal of the path is the opposite of the main narrative drive toward renunciation and dispassion that is found within *The Unravelers*’ and its influences, the early Buddhist *kāvyas*, and *The Pilgrim Kamanita*. The narrative focus in *Hungry Ghost* is not the path of trading sensual pleasures for those of concentration as in *The Unravelers*, it is in Carter’s trading of his addictions for the sensual pleasures of “marijuana, caffeine, alcohol, adrenaline rushes, salt, sugar, orgasms, nicotine, and hot showers,” (54) for another more refined addiction of romantic love.

The novel’s journey toward love centers on Mia Malone, a 26-year-old Catholic and graduate student, whom Carter meets while on a retreat with Christopher’s Tibetan Rinpoche (teacher). Carter flirts mercilessly with Mia through passed letters during the silent retreat, securing a visit from her to stay on his couch in New York “on a friendship basis” (45). Essayist and novelist Pico Iyer writes in a review in the *New York Times*,

titled, “Is the Pope Buddhist,” that “Mia confounds him by actually living out the compassion and devotion Carter only talks about; worse still, from his point of view, she took a vow of chastity at the age of 13, and, unlike Carter, believes that the point of making a vow is that you keep it.” After the retreat, but before Mia’s visit, Carter starts making changes immediately. When he stumbles upon a Thomas Merton quote he posted in anticipation of Mia’s visit, it lends him enough strength and inspiration to forgo his typical indulgence in porn for the night (61).

Mia is the perfect vehicle for Kachtick’s eclecticism. In his introduction to the Buddhist fiction short story collection, Kachtick lays out the philosophy Mia embodies, writing, “Rumi is a Buddhist poet, as are William Blake and Emily Dickinson. The agnostic cab driver who returns the forgotten wallet is a Buddhist citizen. The Jewish baker who volunteers at the synagogue is a Buddhist mensch” (*You Are Not Here* 2-3)¹³. Merton is only the first of many non-Buddhist figures that Mia brings with her into the novel. When she arrives at Carter’s apartment, she describes a spiritual journey and an understanding of Buddhism that is a match for Kachtick’s. Mia reports that she was raised by atheists and in her youth, she, “wasn’t sure which path was best suited for [her] particular tastes and inclinations” so she researched the “Aztecs, the Hasidim . . . Siberian

¹³ Another prominent voice in what Kachtick calls, “the fairly malleable notion of Buddhist fiction,” (*You Are Not Here* 2) is Kate Wheeler, author of the *When Mountains Walked* (2001) and editor of *Nixon Under the Bodhi Tree and Other Works of Buddhist Fiction* (2004)—what Charles Johnson calls “the world’s first volume of Buddhist fiction” in the book’s forward (ix). Susan Bolotin summarizes in a review for the *New York Times* titled, “The Earth Moved: *Kate Wheeler’s Novel is About Lust, Geology and Revolution*” that the “concerns of the book [are] finding one’s self, knowing one’s self, making sense of one’s past, figuring out how to be a woman in relation to a man.” Wheeler writes on her website, “in 2006, I chose to make Buddhist teaching a central occupation (along with writing fiction)” and cites Theravādin training at Spirit Rock Meditation Center and Insight Meditation Society to which she adds a very different school of Buddhism, or at least an aspect of it, which she calls, “a relaxed Dzogchen or Vajrayana quality whenever I share what I have learned about awareness,” through the encouragement of her Tibetan lama Kilung Jigme Rinpoche (“Meditation Teachings”). In her biography on her website, Wheeler also includes an ethics statement that she “will try to embody the Buddha’s teachings,” but also admits to following her own way of doing so such as drinking wine rather than strictly practicing the five precepts (“About Kate”).

shamans, the Zulu . . . and raja and kundalini yoga,” before finally identifying as Catholic at the age of 20. Mia also explains that she added the meditation element to her Catholic faith through her exposure to Merton (*Hungry Ghost* 79).

Mia summarizes her faith—synonymous with the Buddhist goal as depicted in *Hungry Ghost*—when she posits in conversation with Carter that people go to hell when they want, “to have no part of God, no part of love, no part of joy. It’s all about the disposition of the heart, Carter. God is, quite literally love” (83). In one of the novel’s many astounding displays of eclecticism, Mia claims that “Any person who truly loves will go to heaven” (83), roughly equates heaven to nirvana (84) and Buddhism to Christianity because they both arrive “at the liberty of the divine through the dissolution of the self” and claims that “if I weren’t a Christian, I’d probably be a Dharma practitioner . . . or a Taoist” (85). Iyer too reads such pronouncements from Mia as the heart of Kachtick’s Buddhism, when he points out the novel’s “shrewdest irony, which catches the strangeness of the times, is to suggest that the best Buddhist teacher of all may turn out to be a devout Catholic who spends much of her time quoting Aquinas and St. Paul.”

Mia is not the only example of the Kachtick’s Buddhist teaching of overcoming the lower, ego-driven self through love. The dissolution of self through love is sought and taught by Christopher too. As Christopher approaches death he uses psilocybin mushrooms, “the Medicine,” to gain insight (97), and under the influence of the mushrooms he teaches Carter another batch of eclectic wisdom from Huxley, William James, and Huston Smith—that there exists “a *perfect* reality—that leaves this one in the dust. The Medicine doesn’t *cause* visionary experiences” Christopher explains, “it *reveals* them” (97). Christopher meditates in this inebriated state, rising hours later with the only words to describe the experience as “Awesome, awesome” as he sips chamomile

tea (97-99). When Carter leaves, Christopher further instructs him toward Oneness. “*Incinerate* the self, Carter,” he says. “Then they’ll be nothing to separate you from the Great Perfection” (99). Kachtick returns to this version of Buddhist practice in which non-duality of Buddha Nature and identification with love are used interchangeably when Christopher delivers his last instructions to Carter before his death: “Your Buddha Nature is true,” he says. “The Dharma is true . . . You’ve got a good heart, Carter. Keep it filled with love” (133).

Through experience, Carter eventually comes to understand Christopher’s message. He is increasingly able to keep his heart filled with love when traveling with Mia in Morocco, where she serves as a paid assistant on his photoshoot. Carter learns further lessons about love from her, as when he allows himself to be “[m]oved by [his] awakening heart” to confess his shortcomings to her (253). Carter also learns how to use his Buddha Nature nearly like a super-power during the journey with Mia. The most notably instance occurs at the novel’s climax when they are locked in a Moroccan prison by corrupt police. Here Carter discerns their means of escape by closing his eyes and waiting “for an answer, surrendering to [his] omniscient Buddha Nature by shifting [his] point of view to second person” (302). In a gesture clearly symbolic of Kachtick’s own “eclectic American religion,” or “eclectic Buddhism”—as Ferretter labels his predecessor Kerouac (414)—they tie Mia’s rosary beads around Carter’s mala beads, and add a Moroccan prisoner’s “cedarwood prayer strand” and use the long strain of beads to open the door to their freedom (304) as he and Mia move toward their happily-ever-after ending.

Carter’s growth in matters of the heart is inseparable from what he learns about an innate and omniscient Buddha Nature present in everyone. He uses “awakening” fluidly in his writings to refer to both romantic love and Buddha Nature, which combine to form

an eclectic Buddhist narrative in *Hungry Ghost* aimed at achieving happiness through an ethical sensuality. Kachtick does not consider awakening a purely Buddhist experience, listing “Saint Francis, Mahatma Gandhi, [and] the Dalai Lama” as awakened beings and explains that “Buddhism—and the fairly malleable notion of Buddhist fiction—embraces the belief that there are many paths to the Kingdom (*You Are Not Here* 2). Kachtick’s embrace of Oneness and eclecticism is the norm within literary Buddhism, as detailed in section II’s “Recent Criticism on Buddhism and Literature.”

The Unravelers does not hold to the eclecticism common to Buddhist novels, but instead takes seriously the Buddha’s assertion in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon that the noble eightfold path is the only way to awakening and that none who have ever experienced it would dispute this fact (*Majjhima Nikāya* 48). *The Unravelers* depicts the path as consisting of the development of skillful mental qualities like dispassion, not by increasing contact with an already present non-dual Buddha Nature or love. The traditional Theravādin conception of the Buddhist path and goal found in my novel and rooted in the *suttas* is all but absent in the Buddhist novel as it currently stands.

Kachtick’s embrace of many paths to a goal of Oneness is reminiscent of Kerouac. Kachtick is, however, more aligned with the *The Unravelers* is in his presentation of the karma of right action—he presents a form of karma that has rules, where effects follow causes, which is different from Kerouac’s “no rules” approach. In Carter, Kachtick offers a protagonist who knows that he is “the captain of your fate, that who you are right now is based on what you did in the past, and that who you’ll be in the future is determined by what you do next” (14), which is unlike Kerouac’s timeless notion of the Golden Eternity. *Hungry Ghost* also differentiates itself from *The Dharma Bums* in the way Carter acts on his understanding of karma (right view) when redirecting actions that break the precept of sexual misconduct, to sensuality based on the

commitment of marriage when Carter proposes to Mia in the novel's final pages as they leave Casablanca (318).

The harm of sexual misconduct and substance abuse are in fact consistent with the teachings of most religions Kachtick references in his eclectic vision, including Buddhism. In his increased appetite for following the five precepts, Kachtick depicts Carter developing more bright karma with bright results—as discussed above in reference to *Aṅguttara Nikāya* 4.237, and in the skillful actions of the characters of *The Unravelers*. However, Kachtick's eclectic vision of ethical romance, does not follow the laws of karma all the way through as they exist in the *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon. For example, right view, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration all depend on understanding the drawbacks of sensuality and developing concentration in its stead. When the eightfold path is practiced in full, it is said to be karma that is “neither dark nor bright with neither dark nor bright result, leading to the ending of kamma,” a teaching *Hungry Ghost* lacks.

The Unravelers offers a more complete depiction of the path as presented in the *suttas*, a path that is currently presented only partially in *Hungry Ghost* and Buddhist novels as a whole in favor of eclecticism. *The Unravelers* embraces the distinctly Theravāda Buddhist causality of the *suttas* where virtue, concentration, and discernment lead to something unfabricated and uncaused at awakening. As Kairos looks back at civilization near the conclusion of *The Unravelers*, he smells honey and sage like the radiant gods of the prologue before they again fell. But his lofty perspective from altitude does not intoxicate him and he sees the dangers of all becomings, refusing to return to the world. He summarizes his understanding, narrating, “the next taste is never enough. A taste just opens a world around you—a new place to open your mouth and fill your stomach. The taste hooks you to a line that pulls you on and on” (275). The path is

presented in full as early as the novel's prologue where The Guild, the non-returners, use an image from verse 91 of the *Dhammapada* to depict their eventual practice of the path all the way to its terminus, as they unravel even the subtle fabrications involved in states of Oneness, so that they might "unbind. Beyond space and time, where our path can no longer be traced. Like birds we will cut through space" (*The Unravelers* 10).

VII. *The Unravelers'* Contribution to the Buddhist Novel

In a genre that is otherwise dominated by Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhism, *The Unravelers* exploration of the literary potential of the *suttas* of Theravāda is alone a unique contribution to the Buddhist novel. However, fully developing my novel's theme of becoming also necessitated the expansion of the traditional narrative modes of the Theravāda tradition into an experimental literary fiction that is atypical of the genre. *The Unravelers* style and form mirrors aspects of becoming in the overall journey of the characters as they find new ways to engage with their past karma while entering new psychological and cosmological worlds that are increasingly connected to the Buddhist path. Many of these experimental choices in style and form have been discussed already in section II's "Incorporating Narrative Modes from Theravāda Buddhist Literature" and "Adopting Experimental Narrative Modes through Structure and Voice." This final section details my contribution to the Buddhist novel by reviewing the overall impact of the above techniques, including the novel's use of multiple voices and an elliptical story telling style, in order to exhibit becoming. My resulting Theravāda Buddhist novel presents the goals of renunciation and dispassion through the characters and their disentanglement from worldly aims as desirable.

The Unravelers offers four culturally similar narrators to exemplify a segment of American Buddhism that is under-represented in the Buddhist novel—non-Asian

convert Buddhists who take the teachings of dispassion in the *suttas* seriously. Beek describes how reviewers of Buddhist fiction are “readily accepting of descriptions of Buddhism in Asian contexts” (137), but not when Buddhism is depicted in “globalized, modern settings that do not convey the Asian origins of Buddhism” (138). She points out that reviews of *Hungry Ghost*, for example, seem to miss one of Kachtick’s central Buddhist points—that in Carter’s alternative ending, his karma results in rebirth as a hungry ghost. Beek explains, “Perhaps these reviewers did not appreciate the Buddhist narrative modes employed by Kachtick because they were displaced outside of any Asian context” (138).

Through the narrators, *The Unravelers* attempts to further educate readers of the Buddhist teachings on dispassion detailed in the *suttas*. This is done transparently—as discussed in section IV’s “The Karma of Reading”—where the narrators learn to view the limitations of all worlds through exposure to the words of the *suttas*, and also surreptitiously, such as detailed in section II’s “Adopting Experimental Narrative Modes Through Structure and Voice.” These two ways of enfolding the *suttas* present them as a relevant lens for the characters through which to view stress and suffering and in turn offers the broader culture of North America and Europe education about the distinctness of the Buddhist path to awakening as found in the *suttas*. Most narrators portray the goal as a welcome alternative to the unavoidability of aging, illness, and death that comes with continued birth. As non-Asians Buddhist converts living in America, my characters are representative of an emerging cultural context for the traditional teachings of Theravāda Buddhism.¹⁴

¹⁴ Although the narrators of *The Unravelers* are Caucasian—a reflection of the main American ethnic group who currently practice Buddhism—race and gender are often presented as fluid in my novel and the lack of a minority character is not intended to be exclusionary. For example, Leo reports a vision of Vanessa’s past lives as the two move through the turnstile underground before boarding a train: “She is Asian. Chinese. Cambodian, Vietnamese, Laotian, and then Thai . . . Then she is a man. He’s Russian, from the Eastern Bloc, growing all the shades of hair of the

The characters' engagement with the processes of becoming is also where my novel breaks new ground in the Buddhist novel. As has been discussed in the relation to *Cloud Atlas* in section II, the dual aspects of becoming (psychological and cosmological) are congruent with the narrative technique *Mise en Abime* reviewed by Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan—pictures within pictures, or in my case worlds within worlds. The introduction of this essay along with section II discuss the process by which acting on craving creates patterns (karma) that can be entered into as worlds at death. The characters in *The Unravelers* provide an in-depth contemplation of the drawbacks of becoming and the illustration of the willed dispassion that is necessary in order to turn toward the goal of awakening. Their weave of increasingly skillful fabrication through these worlds literally becomes the path (183-84, 283-85).

Similarly, as the reader invests in the characters' success, he or she must also attach temporarily to them as a world of experience and to the path which the characters embody. The dispassion that results in fully letting go is only achieved at awakening, but both characters and readers practice these actions in micro all along the path. For example, the characters let go of harmful actions and develop skillful ones (like generosity and concentration) as they enter more refined worlds along the path. Comparably, readers attach to the characters (a psychological world of becoming), but in a skillful way that allows them to participate in the path of the characters' progress. Readers also must let go as the characters change if they are to continue to taste the worlds portrayed through the characters further along the path to full dispassion. As

Europeans, Africans, South Americans, and finally North Americans when she turns back to female and smiles" (74). Equally important is that the characters represent a broader type of diversity in their various types of craving—for sensuality, becoming, and non-becoming—across their lifetimes.

discussed in section IV, the heroic and astounding *rasas* make the path to dispassion desirable in my novel.

The dual aspects of becoming were integrated into the narrative of *The Unravelers*: 1) physical birth into different worlds (following the mode of the Buddha's recollection of his past lives in his first cognition), and 2) birth in various psychological worlds. One example of both of these levels of becoming at once appears in Kairos' disillusionment during his Colorado chapters where he is trapped within cosmological-psychological worlds of becoming. Through Contact, he is living in actual worlds of his old psychological cravings and cannot tell the difference between the internal and external forms of becoming. In other words, he is confused if he is experiencing cravings based on memory, or actual worlds.

To unpack these principles further, we can look at how the Buddha's first cognition is enfolded into Kairos' disillusionment. In his first cognition on the night of his awakening, the Buddha reports his cosmological recollection (on a larger scale than Kairos' becoming) as he reviewed hundreds of thousands of actual lifetimes across, "many eons of cosmic contraction & expansion." He breaks down the basic experience of each of his births very simply as follows: "There too I had such a name, belonged to such a clan, had such an appearance. Such was my food, such my experience of pleasure & pain, such the end of my life. Passing away from that state, I re-arose here" (*Majjhima Nikāya* 19). Through some of the same terms the Buddha uses above, Kairos explains his analogous psychological becoming, focusing on the craving that drove him on through worlds of romantic relationships, "to splice the formula back together." Over and over he would, "find a town, find food that I liked, find a new job I could stomach, and find a new girl. A distinct feeling of pleasure and pain permeated everything. When pleasure rose, I tried to ride it longer each time. When the pain came, I patched it" (191).

Similar to the Buddha's first cognition, my narrative does not attempt to flesh out all the details of the nuances of a human life through Kairos or any of the other three first-person narrators, but it does depict their births and deaths on various cosmological and psychological levels and the essence of their specific experiences of pleasure and pain. Instead of portraying seemingly infinite lifetimes of a single person, such as in the Buddha's first cognition, *The Unravelers* uses this technique to demonstrate only a few lifetimes of four narrators each centered on one human birth, such as Kairos' example above. As a result, the narrative remains focused enough to draw out the karmic connections between each narrator's most recent births while allowing opportunities for the karmic connections between characters to be established and portrayed.

In addition to its illustration of karma through becoming, *The Unravelers* also offers further experimentation to the Buddhist novel, most notably in its inescapably fragmented style. This choice was largely due to the complexity that is required when depicting the processes of becoming through four beings at once. As mentioned in earlier sections, to highlight becoming, a single choice within one psychological world is presented per chapter whenever possible. This results in a tendency toward short chapters and a Buddhist novel where each narrator individually can only provide a sketch of a human lifetime.

In keeping with the principle of becoming, however, these micro psychological becomings do not affect *The Unravelers* ability to tell a more complete larger cultural story at the same time. Together, the narrators more or less portray the full sequence of a human life in America. For example, childhood memories like "Vanessa: Return" and "Kairos: Birth" are more prominent early on in the narrative, whereas college and immediately afterward occupy the middle in "Vanessa: Amelie," and the five chapter sequence beginning with "Jules: Lotuses" and ending with "Kairos: New Yorkers."

Finally, the chapters of the one character that lives into his fifties, Kairos, dominates the end of the novel. Old age, while featured prominently in early drafts, was left out to focus the narrative on a broader human vulnerability, especially during the college years that Americans' generally regard, in my experience, as "the best times in life." *The Unravelers'* constant reflection on the death of young people impresses that it is not only experienced by the old and is rarely timely. The reflection is also overwhelmingly positive in the sense that death is not portrayed as the end, and the characters use the reflection for motivation to help them find the path out of birth and death entirely.

The Unravelers' use of this multi-narrative technique is new for the Buddhist novel, but might also be called an experimental version of the one James Joyce employs in *Dubliners* (1914), a collection that is also about a culture more so than about any one individual in particular.¹⁵ Earlier drafts, in fact, followed Joyce's structure more closely in order to depict American culture with a Buddhist slant, but my novel was further fragmented by the decision to also illustrate *rasa* through the portrayal of the characters' cosmological "tasting" of the places they have lived and of where they might be born next. The psychological aspects of becoming also required a more dynamic narration style that originates largely within the characters' post-human lives as devas, hungry-ghosts, or beings in hell while engaging with those habit patterns connected to what they *did* in the past, that is, what karma they left themselves with. In the end, the fragmented multi-narrative technique illustrates the workings of memory, becoming, and *rasa* through the narrators' tasting of worlds.

¹⁵ A variation of this narrative strategy also appears at the end of the *Udāna*. The final story of the collection covers the final unbinding of Ven. Dabba Mallaputta appears to be a stand-in for the Buddha's own experience. Since the collection was organized around exclamations of the Buddha, if his own final unbinding ended the book, the Buddha would have had to exclaim about his own unbinding too in order to follow the form. This, of course, would be an impossibility (Ṭhānissaro, *Udāna* 7-8).

As previously discussed in section II's "Literary Review," my novel's reliance on several first-person narrators is akin to Mitchell, but also features supplementary uses of voice such as first-person plural and second person. There remains one additional experimental technique that my novel employs to illustrate and utilize both *rasa* and becoming: the frequent shifts from first-person past tense to first-person present tense. It is the most recurrent but perhaps also the subtlest technique, and supports the more obvious elliptical story telling style that will be discussed last.

The tense shifts can be observed in the opening montage of the deaths of the four narrators, when they remember their past lives. The past tense is used, but as the narrators fully inhabit the memory, in some cases reliving it as if characters in a play, the tense shifts. In the first line of the below excerpt, Kai alludes to the way he, like the other protagonists, was complicit in choosing what world to enter next during his death. Kai narrates, "I too was racing back through time, searching my mind for an island—a memory on which to land . . . Just then the road slips from underneath my tires, and time slows down . . . I feel a calm even as the ground rises to greet me" (26-27). Kai remembers (past tense) and then inhabits (present tense) the scene of his death when he crashed his car in the canyons—a scene he revisits with slight variation throughout the novel. I will discuss the resulting elliptical nature of the narrative further below.

Present tense is also used when a character enters a world for the first time. When Kai is first guided by an inexperienced Vanessa, he describes the place where he can re-experience his past life as follows:

These scenes are to show me that I've come home to this place just behind the scenes where we feel many homes at once. You don't want to shock me with potentials, by revealing the variegated and bent worlds around us. I will make my choices in time.

I reach toward the book in front of me, but my young arms come up short.

(31)

To underline the distance between this place “behind the scenes,” the tense shifts to past as Kai re-experiences the childhood memory. At the end of scene, when it is time to apply its lesson and choose what world (what room) to enter next, Kai again more fully inhabits the scene through the present tense, highlighting his power to choose.

Now, you say, watching the scene from behind me. Now is the time to make your choices.

I close my eyes despite the nausea and lose all sense of direction. I imagine the gods watching us from above—or am I asking them to?

We are a silver cursive line trolling among the waves, perhaps spelling something in some secret language. My thoughts are overcome by water, the lapping waves erasing me. One phrase. One letter at a time. I could be anyone. (42)

One notable exception to the standard method of switching tenses in *The Unravelers* is my use of past tense to enhance a narrator’s feeling of dissociation from their body—such as Vanessa’s rape in “Vanessa: Amelie” and the scene leading up to Jules suicide in “Jules: Lotuses.” Overall, however, the purpose of switching tense between present and past is that it provides a constant reminder throughout the novel that the characters are repeatedly engaging in the process of becoming, creating and stepping into one world after another. As already mentioned, there are also more obvious switches in voice in *The Unravelers*, such as when the narrative moves into second person or first person plural, but these subtle switches between present and past tense are the constant reminder of the characters’ ongoing creation of worlds—their fabrication (the reconditioning) of past karma into the present. The changing tenses and point of views

provide constant new angles on in the presentation of becoming—a switch in perspective that is a becoming itself, and also serves to illustrate, in literary form, the many levels and nuances of the principle.

Relatedly, the most important aspect of becoming portrayed in *The Unravelers* is that the continuation of becoming relies on the characters' fabrication of present moment. As discussed in section III's "Fabrication," the characters must comprehend their own role in constructing own world before they can choose a new course of action. All narrative techniques converge on this point. For example, the *suttas* teach the characters to develop their intentions—to apply more skill in their present choices—and the repetition of physical objects is used to exhibit where each character is still tied to craving and to track changes in his or her progress, such as with Leo's crack pipe mouth.

This process of honing present choice as depicted through the characters is similar in my experience to what a meditator faces during concentration practice. The defilements (*kilesas*) of greed, aversion, and delusion, craving for sensuality, for becoming, and for non-becoming, continually loop back into the mind until their particular scenes and stories become commonplace and familiar. These defilements can arise in all sorts of new contexts, with various new wrinkles, but eventually can be ended when the meditator comprehends habitual forms of fabrication through the application of energy and persistence and by abandoning the craving that keeps the loop going.

Likewise, in addition to the repetition of guidance from the *suttas* and the orientation provided for the reader through recurring physical objects, characters often face a repeated scene which serves as a gathering place for their most intense craving. Kairos and Vanessa, for example, return again and again to their human deaths and their characteristic craving present there—Kairos longs for his lost love as his car crashes, and Vanessa returns to her desire to save others as the tower collapses. Each re-experience

provides them with an opportunity to add new present karma—that is, they can apply what they have learned about fabrication and make a new choice. What results is an elliptical story telling style in *The Unravelers* that is not broken until the last scene of the novel. Here, Kairos and Vanessa demonstrate that they have learned not to repeat old mistakes through the act of stepping out of their looping scenes and onto the path.

The novel's elliptical story telling style also allows the reader to taste the characters' Buddhist experience of generating dispassion for sensual aims through the modes of repetition mentioned above and also in smaller loops such as in "Vanessa: Deep Sea Blossoms." Here, Vanessa catches her co-dependent thoughts toward Jules at the opening of the scene and for the second time after she boards the ferry: "If she could just be with me for a day . . . I know she'd be cured . . . No, these are my crazy thoughts. I can't think them. I don't know what I should say, so I just repeat the same question as yesterday, the same as last year, the same as college" (136). In this second instance Vanessa notices the old pattern and refuses to play along. Instead she offers Jules her own insight into the freedom of choice. "I have no choice," Jules says as she drifts down into the ocean. "You can start over," Vanessa offers and then yells, "There's nothing down there! . . . You don't have to go!" (137). Jules might be incorrigible in her plunge, but Vanessa is depicted as continually fighting to free herself from her co-dependency over her next three chapters culminating in finally letting go in "Vanessa: Crossing."

Similarly, Kairos also realizes the predicament of habitual forms of craving and fabrication when dreaming of walking a loop trail in "Day 2, Return." He is self-aware enough to understand, "I can return here every night. A wanderer lingering in the land he can't let go. It can be my place where I can remember" (245). The scene centers on Vanessa's continually looping line to him about the "deer in winter" who starve because they won't leave their circular path through the snowy forest, like Kairos cannot let go of

his craving from Isabel. As Kairos wakes, he again longs for Isabel, but also demonstrates some integration of Vanessa's lesson by repeating the deer in winter line and following it with the realization that he *is* the deer. "All these rooms are giant circles," he says, closing the chapter: "Here the hunger never ends" (246).

In the above examples my work's elliptical story-telling style, the narrators realize their old patterns of fabrication and are sometimes able to make changes to overcome them. In the repetition, the reader is presented with an opportunity to taste the characters growing dispassion. The larger repetition of physical objects and partial scenes are also an opportunity for readers to make new meaning when encountering the echo of earlier text. In this way, the reader too can become better able to apply the novel's Buddhist lens—or they are at least continually granted this opening through the novel's elliptical story telling style. The readers' attachment to the characters is like attachment to the path itself in that it includes the skillful desire that the characters work to get out of old patterns in order to free themselves from suffering. The attachment the reader experiences is therefore to the generation of dispassion, an attachment that is consistent with the path because it includes the necessary desire to let go, to unravel.

Through multiple voices and a fragmented elliptical story-telling style, my novel portrays the protagonists' ability to train their present karma of intention and take advantage of previously unobserved openings to get onto the path. The traditional theory of *rasa* is used to make the path attractive and subordinates all *rasas* to that of the astounding in its presentation of images, ideas, and karma is presented as consistent with the early Buddhist path. The resulting experimental and literary Theravāda teleological mode of the *The Unravelers*—the use of becoming to get beyond becoming—is in contrast to most other contemporary Buddhist novels that are mostly forms of eclectic-Buddhism influenced in part by Mahayana and, to a lesser extent, Vajrayana Buddhism.

The Unravelers is unique in its foundation in and use of the Theravāda *suttas* of the *Pāli* Canon, early Buddhist *kāvya* literature, and application of *rasa*.

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